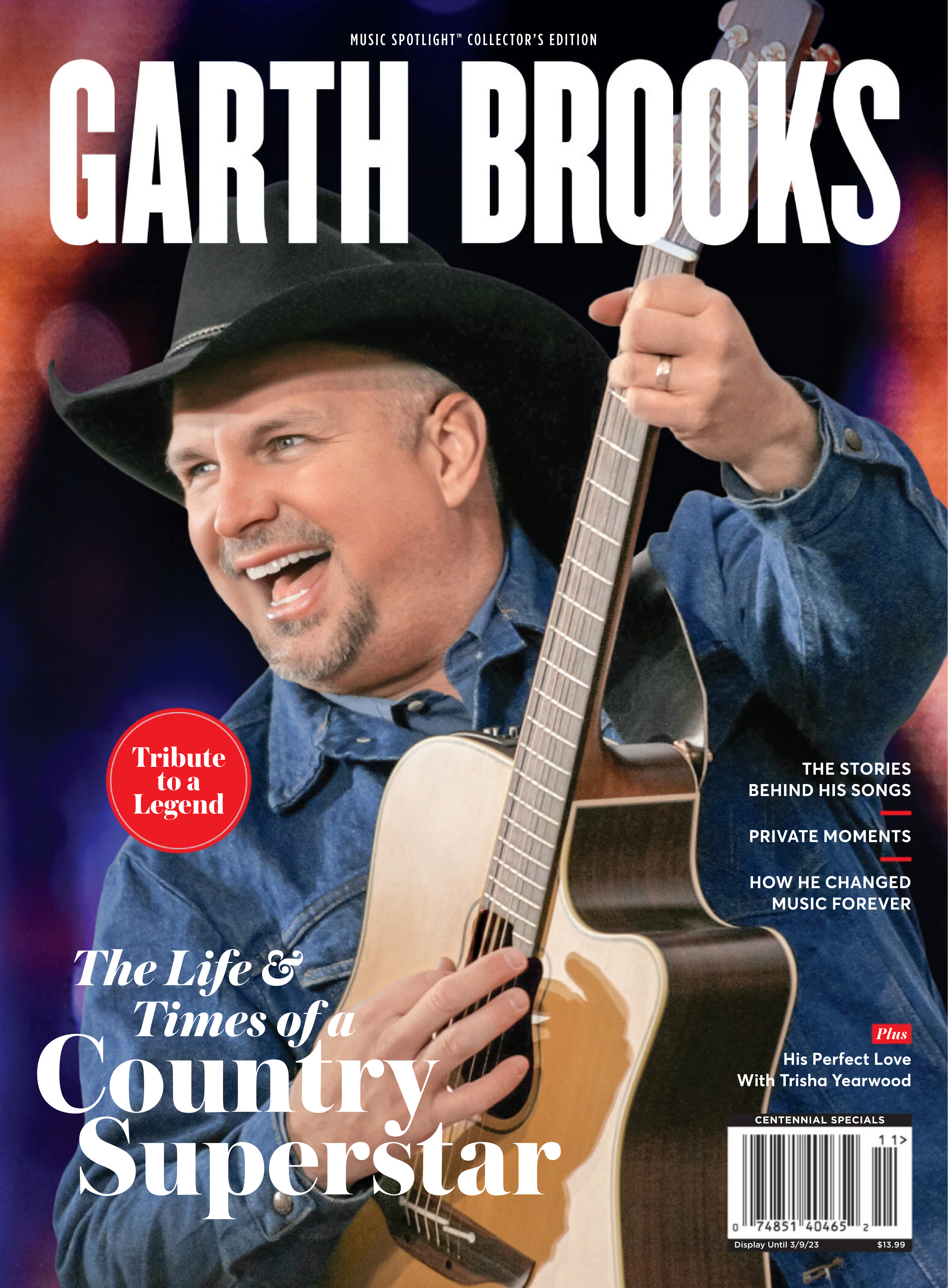
MUSIC SPOTLIGHT™ COLLECTOR'S EDITION

GARTH BROOKS



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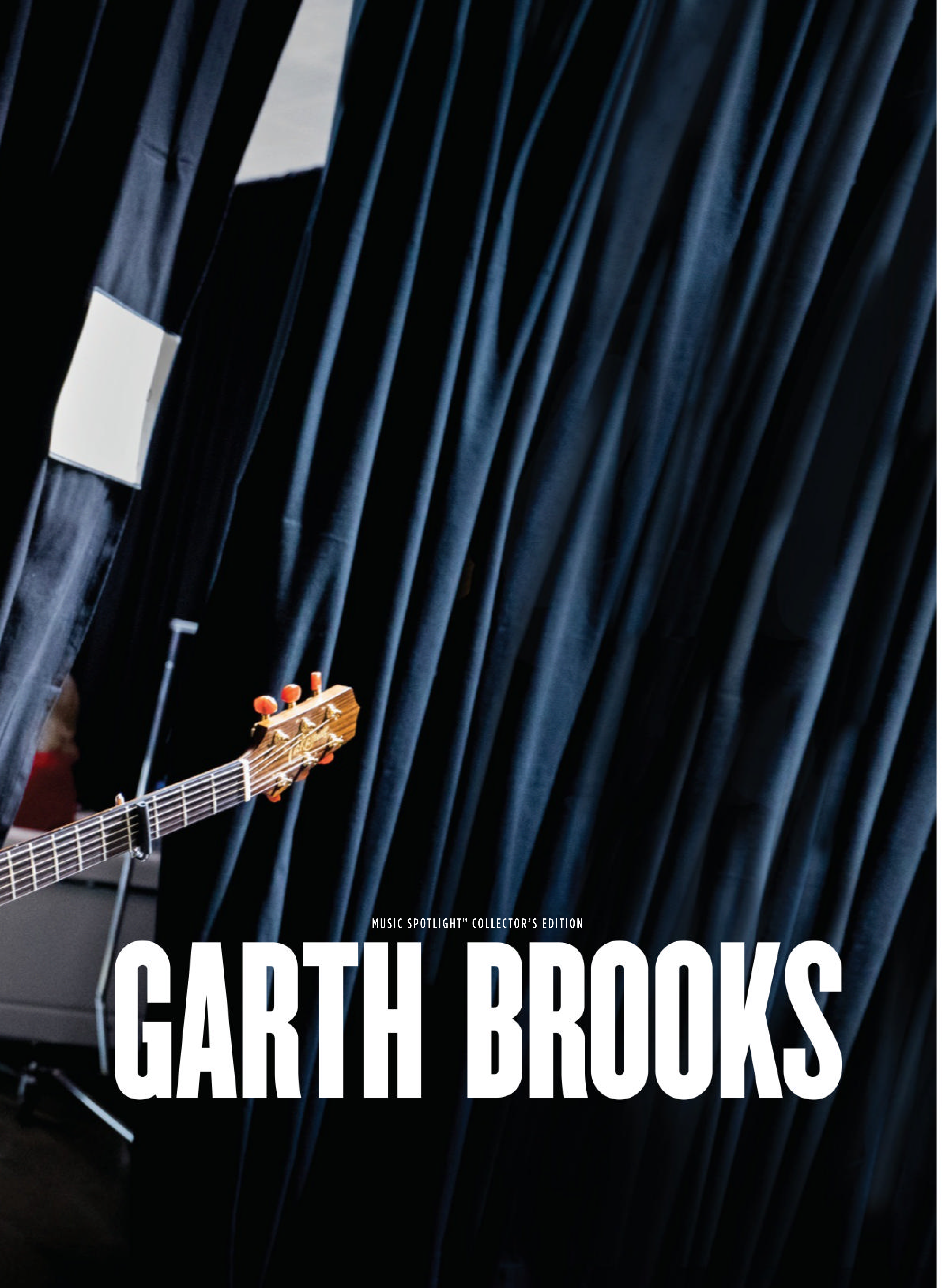
“There’s always hunger to create because I believe that’s what I do. I believe that’s what I’m supposed to be doing,” says the artist, whose 30-plus year career is still going strong.



MUSIC SPOTLIGHT™ COLLECTOR'S EDITION

GARTH BROOKS

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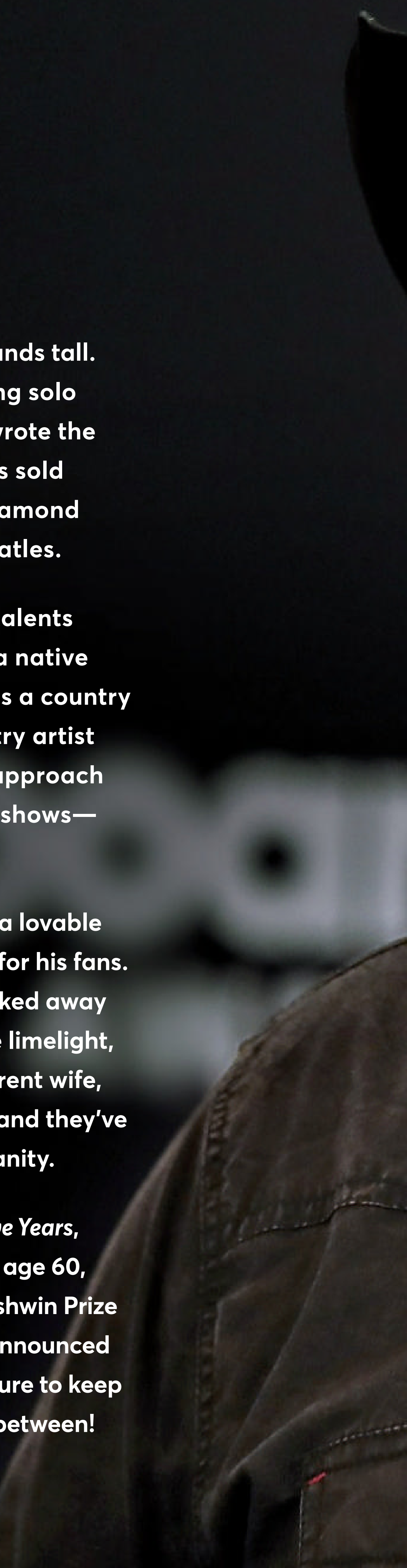
Garth Brooks lights up the stage at the Pepsi Center in Denver on March 18, 2015.

WRAPPED UP IN YOU

Paying tribute to the crown prince of country music, Garth Brooks.



In the annals of country music record breakers, Garth Brooks stands tall. The highest-selling country artist in history, and the bestselling solo American musician in any genre during the 20th century, he rewrote the rules for what it meant to be a Nashville superstar. Garth has sold 170 million records worldwide, with seven of them reaching diamond status—a record unmatched even by Elvis Presley or The Beatles.

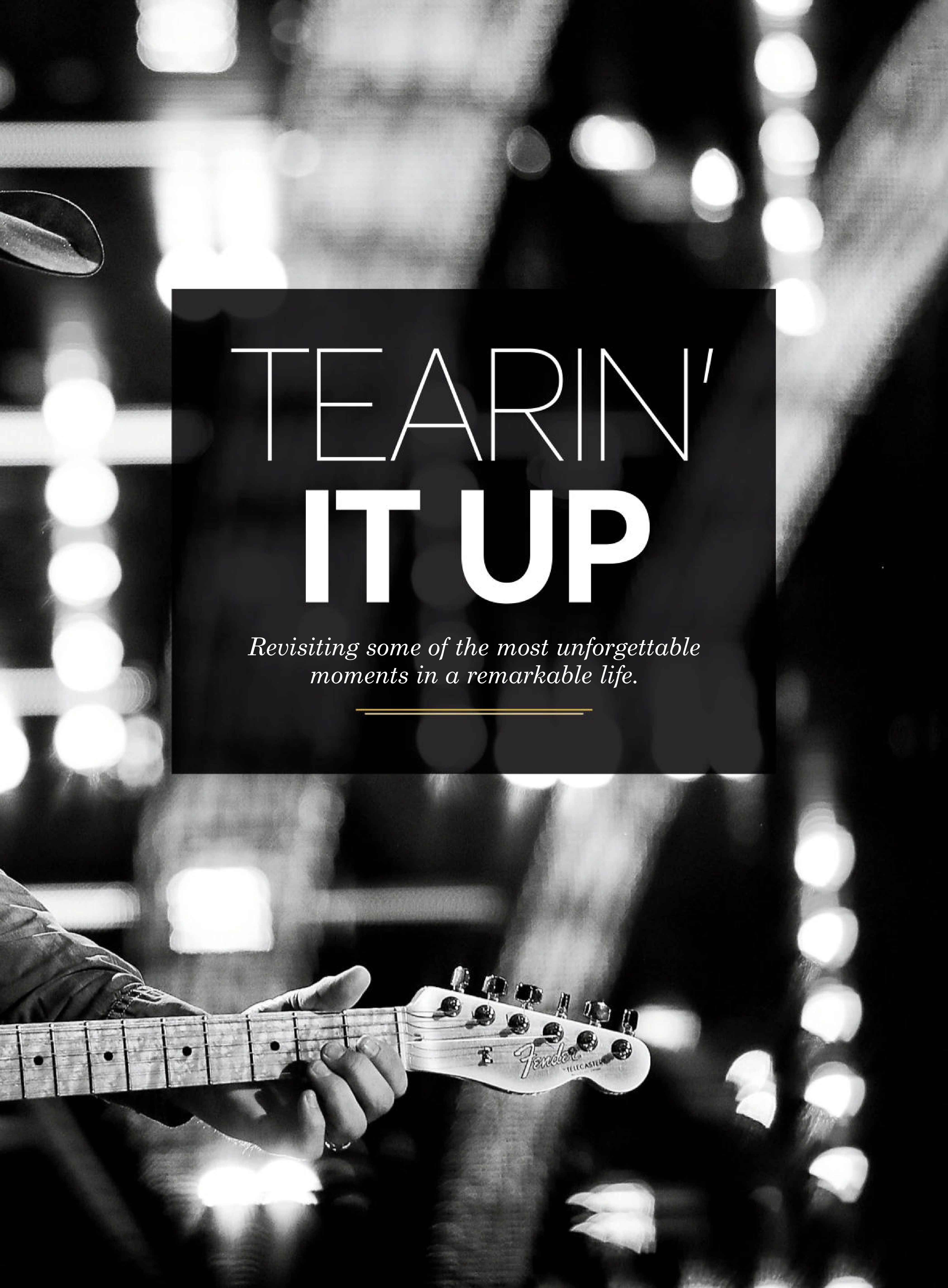
His meteoric rise changed the industry. One of the standout talents from country music's celebrated "Class of 1989," the Oklahoma native quickly reached new heights: His sophomore album, *No Fences*, was a country No. 1, and its follow-up, *Ropin' the Wind*, was the first by a country artist to debut at the top of the *Billboard* pop chart. His pop-friendly approach and tireless showmanship—epitomized by his high-energy live shows—made the genre a crossover force like never before.

But Garth is so much more than his glittering trophy cabinet. He's a lovable goofball who isn't afraid to poke fun at himself and always has time for his fans. He's also a devoted family man who, in the prime of his career, walked away to be there for his daughters as they grew up. Since returning to the limelight, he's formed one of the genre's greatest power couples with his current wife, Trisha Yearwood. The couple champion a host of charitable causes, and they've especially poured their hearts and souls into Habitat for Humanity.

On Nov. 15, 2022, Garth released *The Anthology, Part II: The Next Five Years*, a six-CD box set showcasing his career from 1996 to 2001. Now, at age 60, the icon can take pride in his many accolades, which include the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song and Kennedy Center Honors. And with a recently announced Las Vegas residency kicking off at Caesars Palace in May 2023, he's sure to keep thrilling his fans, be they in low places, high places or anywhere in between!

The artist smiles backstage at the Billboard Music Awards, held at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, on Oct. 14, 2020.

Garth Brooks gives it his all during an iHeart Radio Music Awards performance at Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles on March 14, 2019.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TEARIN' IT UP

Revisiting some of the most unforgettable moments in a remarkable life.

> “My world begins and ends with Miss Yearwood.”
>
> GARTH BROOKS

Garth and wife Trisha Yearwood get cozy at the ASCAP Centennial Awards in New York in 2014.

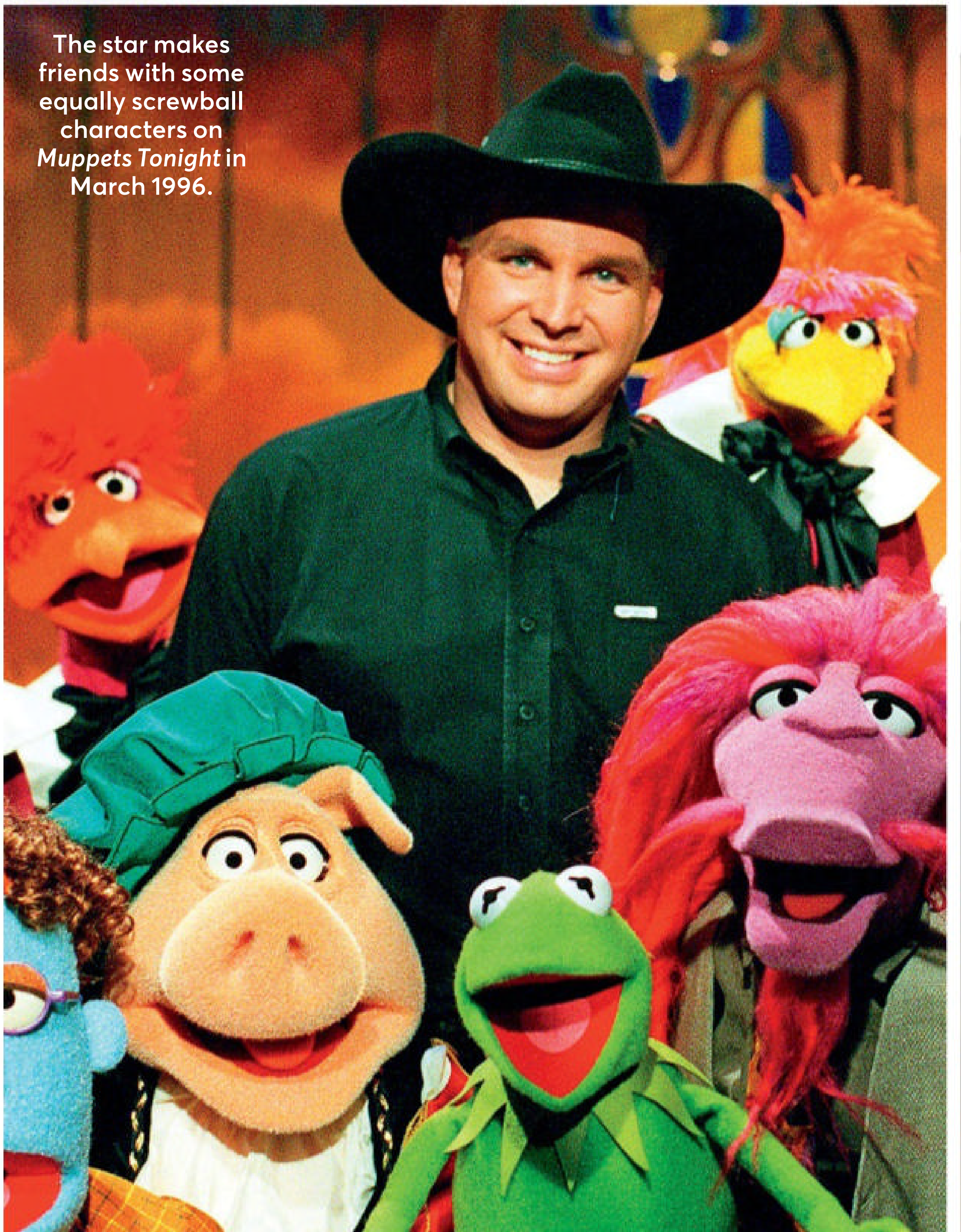
The icon celebrates his seventh Diamond album on Oct. 25, 2016, in Nashville, Tennessee.

After guesting on NBC's *The Voice* in 2016, Garth teamed up with coach Blake Shelton for "Dive Bar."

The star performs The Isley Brothers' "Shout" on Jan. 18, 2009, during President Barack Obama's three-day inauguration party.

Never one to let down his adoring fans, Garth, here in September 2015, is legendary for his marathon autograph-signing sessions.

The entertainer has contributed to many Habitat for Humanity builds, like this 2015 one in Memphis, Tennessee.



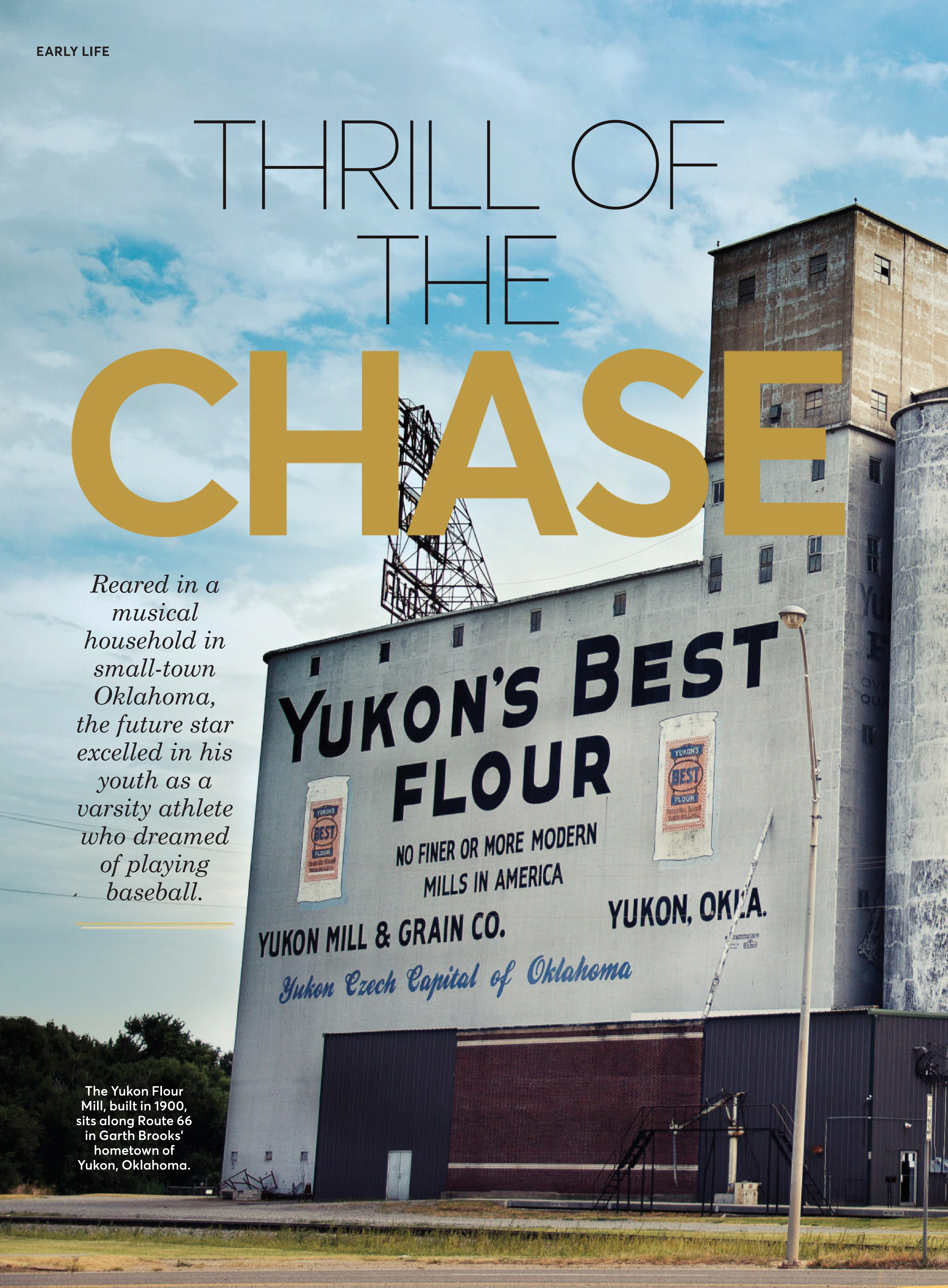
The star makes friends with some equally screwball characters on *Muppets Tonight* in March 1996.

George Strait, here with Garth in Las Vegas in April 2013, has more country No. 1 singles than anyone, and was a huge influence on the singer.

> “All I ever wanted to be was George Strait.”
>
> GARTH BROOKS

THRILL OF THE CHASE

Reared in a musical household in small-town Oklahoma, the future star excelled in his youth as a varsity athlete who dreamed of playing baseball.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The Yukon Flour Mill, built in 1900, sits along Route 66 in Garth Brooks' hometown of Yukon, Oklahoma.

LIKE SO MANY OF HIS HEROES, GARTH BROOKS' journey began far from the limelight, in a modest home smack dab in middle America. Troyal Garth Brooks was born Feb. 7, 1962, the youngest of six children to Troyal Raymond Brooks—known to most as Raymond—and Colleen Carroll Brooks in Oklahoma City. When Garth was 4 years old, the Brookses moved to the small town of Yukon, about 15 miles outside the city, and settled in a split-level home in a residential neighborhood. Yukon was an industrial town—its tallest building and biggest employer was the Yukon Flour plant—and the famed Route 66 cut through it.

Family life would have a considerable impact on the person that Garth grew up to be, and in many ways he was a mix of his two strong-willed parents. Each had children from previous marriages: Raymond had a son, Michael, and Colleen two sons (Jim and Jerry) and a daughter (Betsy). Husband and wife adopted each other's children, then had two more together, with son Kelly arriving a year and a half before Garth.

Raymond was a stern taskmaster with a firm blue-collar ethic, an ex-Marine who worked as a draftsman for the Union 86 oil company. "He could be very strict about things he considered important, but he had an incredible softness, too," Garth told biographer Patsi Bale Cox. Colleen, by contrast, was a free spirit, a creative soul who abandoned a regional singing career to become a full-time parent.

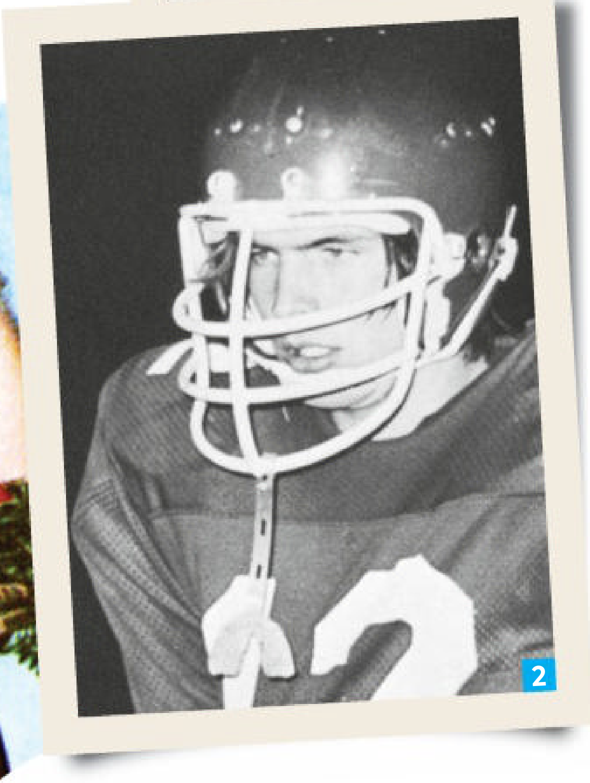
Both parents were avid music fans and passed that enthusiasm onto their children. Besides his wife's vocal skills, Raymond played guitar; each of his sons picked up the instrument as well, as did daughter Betsy, while Jim also learned harmonica and Garth the banjo. Together they set up weekly talent shows, for which each family member was not only encouraged but required to perform. Music was not just a fun pastime, but an established way to help bring the family together and strengthen their bond. Garth never lost touch with that communal power of performance.

A young Garth, age 7, flashes an eager smile in his second grade yearbook photo in the fall of 1969.

Being the youngest came with a number of privileges for him. There was the obvious benefit of learning from his older siblings' mistakes—as he later reflected, he never really rebelled against his parents, as his brothers and sister had already done that for him—but more importantly he was also able to absorb their diverse tastes in music. "Being the youngest of six kids, my influences come from all over the board," he observed. His father was a country fan who loved traditional crooners like George Jones and Merle Haggard. His brothers loved rock 'n' roll, and through them Garth developed an obsession with the likes of Queen, Styx and Boston. His tastes gravitated toward softer rock and balladeers, like Elton John or James Taylor. Melded together, those affinities shaped him into a unique and multifaceted performer, one who brought an unusual pop proclivity to country music.

Despite his dad's influence, country music wasn't really of interest to Garth. That changed, however, in 1981 when he heard "Unwound," the breakthrough single from a singer from across state lines in Texas, George Strait. The future "King of Country's" smooth delivery and traditional style cut through to Garth, and from there on out it was country music all the way for him. "I knew in that moment that this was the type of music I wanted to sing," he said.

Outside of work and music, Raymond was also a Little League baseball coach, and he encouraged all of the kids to pursue sports as they were growing up. Here Garth's siblings excelled even more than he did, although he was no slouch himself: In high school he was a three-sport athlete, partaking in football, baseball and track and field, where he threw javelin. Baseball was his



favorite: "The only thing that stopped me from being a professional baseball player was that I sucked," he later quipped. While admittedly a jock, Garth was a good student and widely popular among his classmates, with whom he fit in naturally as a class clown.

Intent on following his siblings' lead, Garth enrolled at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, where his brother Kelly was a student two years ahead of him. The brothers shared an unusually close bond, not only playing on the same sports teams but rooming together as well. (A later roommate was Ty England, a guitarist from town whom he met working at a coffee shop.) Garth had a partial scholarship for the track team, where he excelled as an all-conference javelin thrower. With music still in the back of his mind, Garth chose advertising as a major, hoping his studies could help propel him to a career writing commercial jingles.

★

"Dad's always been one of those your-word-is-your-bond men. I took that to heart."

GARTH BROOKS, ON HIS FATHER RAYMOND

But Garth's life course would be permanently altered during his senior year of college in the spring of 1984. That year he missed the cut for the Big Eight Conference meet, something which had never happened to him in his three prior years at OSU. As he later recalled, he found himself lying morosely in a pole vault pit during the meet when one of the team trainers passed him. "Now you can get on with what you're supposed to be doing," she told him.

Garth was shocked by the comment, but took it as a wake-up call. He'd always been a dreamer: Depending on the day or mood, he could see himself as a major league ballplayer, an actor or a singer. But he'd never committed himself to any one thing in his life. "I was always more of a talker than a doer," he admitted to author Bruce Feiler. Now was the time to start doing. And the only life he could really see himself pursuing was being a country music star. From here on out, nothing else would get in his way.

1 Football ace Garth escorts the Yukon High School homecoming queen at a game during his senior year, in the fall of 1979. The team mascot was the Millers, named for the Yukon mill. **2** He was a three-sport athlete during high school, playing football (pictured), baseball and track and field. He was known for having an especially strong throwing arm. **3** Garth (center, back row) loved baseball, first and foremost.

WORKIN' ON A FULL HOUSE

The star had an early musical role model in the form of his mother, Colleen.

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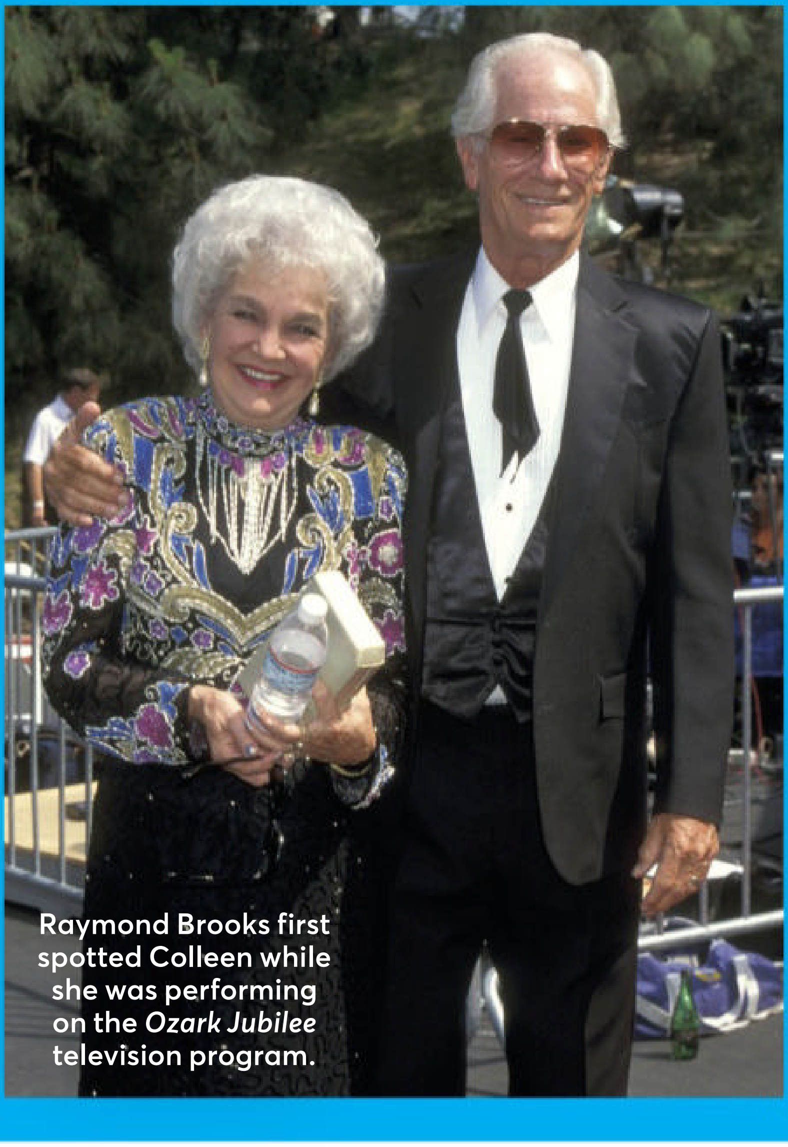
Colleen McElroy Carroll, Garth's mother, poses for a publicity pic during her singing career, in 1955.

GARTH BROOKS WAS never afraid to say it: He was a mama's boy, through and through. And really, you can't blame him. His mother, Colleen, was described as a warm, loving and funny individual who did everything she could to encourage his creativity. No surprise, then, that she herself was a musician of some talent.

Born in 1929 (two years prior to Garth's father, Raymond), Colleen was signed to Capitol Records in the early 1950s and released a handful of singles as Colleen Carroll, including "No Tellin'" and "Blue Bonnet Waltz." During this time she picked up a regular gig on the *Ozark Jubilee*. Originally a radio program based in St. Louis, it was picked up for television by ABC in 1955. The variety show format was similar to other shows popular in the day, like the *Louisiana Hayride* in Shreveport, Louisiana, or the *Grand Ole Opry* in Nashville, Tennessee—the premier stage in all of country music at that time. The show hosted leading stars like Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash as special guests. "One time, Jackie Gleason even sang background," Garth told *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Colleen's success as a singer nonetheless remained small-time compared to what her son would go on to do. Still, Garth cited her as a major influence. She would often lead family sing-alongs at home, and daughter Betsy also went on to pursue a career of her own in music. "My mother is the best female singer I ever heard, and the most professional in her attitude about the business, too," Garth once boasted.

Colleen was able to bask in the subsequent stardom of her youngest son, but sadly not for long: She passed away in 1999 at the age of 70, having succumbed to cancer. Garth's father, Raymond, would live for 11 years more before dying at the age of 79 in 2010.



Raymond Brooks first spotted Colleen while she was performing on the *Ozark Jubilee* television program.

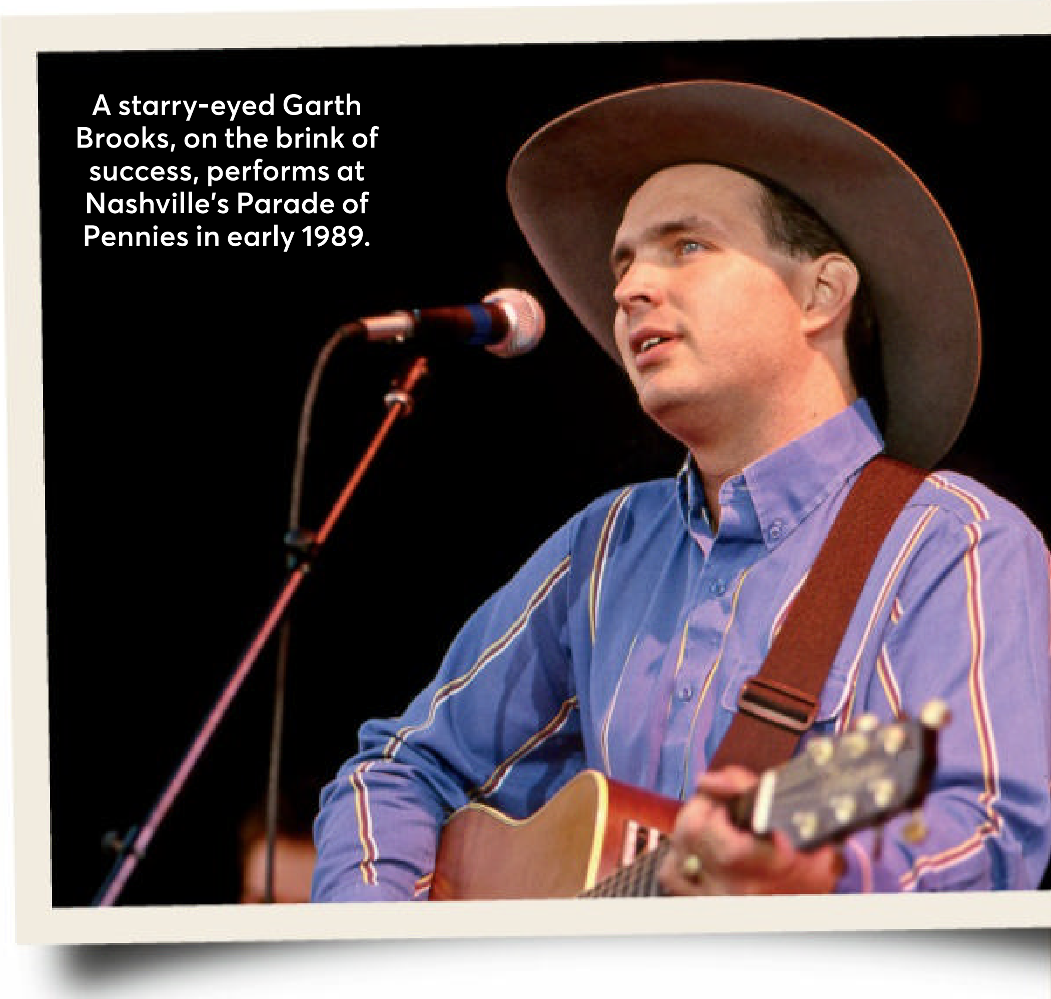
FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

Fresh out of college, the ambitious young singer began to forge a path in the music business, but his initial efforts fell flat in Nashville, Tennessee.

ALL THROUGH HIS COLLEGE YEARS, MUSIC HAD never left Garth Brooks' life. Neither had performing. When he wasn't busy with classes, athletics or a part-time job, the eager student was booking gigs around town or on campus every chance he got.

In 1982, he won $50 in a talent show at Oklahoma State University. He played in the student union and at dorm parties, and volunteered at a medical center in Stillwater, Oklahoma, where he would perform for patients. Garth went in and out of various bands through his college years, usually taking gigs in town at places like Willie's Wild Saloon. The sets consisted of crowd-pleasing covers, including the likes of Neil Young or James Taylor, and usually ended with Don McLean's "American Pie."

Before he graduated in 1984, Garth made his first trip to Nashville, Tennessee, the capital of country music. It was to be his first brush with making it: While there, he


A starry-eyed Garth Brooks, on the brink of success, performs at Nashville's Parade of Pennies in early 1989.

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REAL COUNTRY MUSIC

Iconic signage shines along Broadway in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, which remains the beating heart of country music.

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The Bluebird Cafe
GARTH BROOKS

1 Trisha Yearwood (pictured on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* in 1995) arrived in Nashville around the same time as Garth, and the two aspiring singers struck up a friendship. **2** Like Garth, Alan Jackson (right) was a member of country music's vaunted "Class of '89," one of the genre's many "hat acts" and would-be rival to his fellow rising star. **3** The Bluebird Cafe in Nashville helped land the singer his big break with Capitol Records after talent scout Lynn Shults caught one of his live performances.

auditioned to join the musical portion of the Opryland U.S.A. theme park and was duly offered a job. However, when he reported the news to his parents, Raymond and Colleen, they ordered him to finish his schooling instead.

Undeterred, he returned to Music City in 1985, this time for a meeting with Merlin Littlefield, the vice president of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), arranged by a friend named Bob Phelps, an attorney from Dallas. Littlefield not only wasn't impressed by Garth, he was belittling in his feedback. When a staff songwriter stepped in asking for a loan, Littlefield cruelly brushed him off. "I hated him, man. I hated his guts," Garth later told *Rolling Stone*.

All the same, Garth doubled down on his efforts to make headway back in Oklahoma. He assembled a new band that he called Santa Fe, and together they vowed that they would move to Nashville together by 1987. They spent the intervening time gigging furiously around the region, playing honky-tonks and holes-in-the-wall from state to state, from New Mexico to Kansas City. They opened for country stars like Dwight Yoakam and Johnny Paycheck, while Garth made frequent trips back and forth to Nashville attempting to build contacts with songwriters and by attending the all-important song-pull sessions that happened throughout the city.

Garth's personal life was also busy: While working as a bouncer at a bar called Tumbleweed Ballroom in Stillwater, he'd met a fellow student named Sandy Mahl. The two began dating and, on May 24, 1986, they were married. "My wife knows me inside and out," he told *Playboy* in 1994.

Finally, in 1987, Garth, Sandy and his bandmates and their significant others loaded up and headed for Nashville. Within a few months' time the band had mostly disintegrated, but he and Sandy were burrowed in, having landed jobs together working at a boot store. They got a house in the small town of Hendersonville, Tennessee, and Garth continued doing the rounds while commuting.

One of the people that Garth had connected with on his previous visits, Stephanie Brown, took a demo of his to Bob Doyle, an A&R man at ASCAP. Unlike his boss Littlefield, Doyle could immediately see the promise in this unknown singer from Oklahoma. "I sensed authenticity in him, honesty and integrity," Doyle recalled. "Combine that with the talent and you just had to be impressed." When his efforts to get the company to sign Garth failed, Doyle quit and set up his own publishing company, Doyle-Lewis, in partnership with Pam Lewis, who worked at MTV before moving to Nashville. He also became Garth's manager. It was an inspired decision.

Meanwhile, Garth continued playing around town, with one of his favorite haunts being The Bluebird Cafe, a popular spot for songwriters to get noticed. Garth was working up a repertoire of his own original songs, including "If Tomorrow Never Comes" and "Much Too Young (To Be This Damn Old)." He also picked up work singing other writers' demos as samples for big-name artists to record through his friend Kent Blazy, with whom he co-wrote "If Tomorrow Never Comes." When Blazy had tracks that required a duet, he teamed Garth with a young woman who was working at the time as a receptionist: Trisha Yearwood. The two immediately hit it off and, though each was married to someone else already, never fell out of touch.

Still, Nashville execs were slow to appreciate this diamond in the rough. Doyle shopped his new find around to all seven of the major labels; all of them said no, believing that he was a mediocre singer and an unremarkable songwriter. One of the execs who turned Garth down was Lynn Shults, who worked for Capitol Records.

Then, in the spring of 1988, Shults caught Garth at the Bluebird. "Everything changed for me," Shults told author Patsi Bale Cox in 1991. What failed to jump out at him on tape blindsided him in the flesh: Garth was full of charisma, able to enrapture the room. Shults didn't hesitate: There and then, he offered Garth a handshake deal. Garth would be signed to a contract with Capitol, not just for a one-off single but an album contract.

While the rest of Nashville had seemingly been sleeping on Garth, his few supporters were already all-in. This kid was no doubt going places. Still, no one involved could've anticipated just how far he'd make it.

The Texas native was an inspiration to the young Oklahoman.

ACE IN THE HOLE

How George Strait created the blueprint for Garth Brooks.

WHEN GARTH BROOKS landed in Nashville, Tennessee, in the mid-1980s, he fit a certain description. "Hat acts" were all the rage in country music, and they were all looking to emulate one man in particular: George Strait.

Strait, like Garth, had come to country music through the back door. Growing up in the one-horse town of Poteet, Texas, where he worked on his father's farm, Strait preferred The Beatles, but became hooked on Merle Haggard and Bob Wills while serving in the Army. Having gigged everywhere he could around Texas, he tried his hand in Nashville in 1978—and met with the same dismissive response that Garth later encountered.

But Strait had a killer live show worked up with his backing band, the Ace in the Hole Band, and when execs from MCA Records saw him they snapped him up. Strait wore cowboy hats, starched button-up shirts and blue jeans in an era of rhinestone suits and outlaws. The release of the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy* starring John Travolta, based on a real-life club in Houston owned by country singer Mickey Gilley, fueled a mainstream spike for "authentic" cowboys, and Strait was the perfect fit.

His first single with MCA, "Unwound," was a Top 20 country hit, and from there he was untouchable, racking up a total of 44 country No. 1s on the *Billboard* chart—earning him the moniker "King George." His style came to be known as neo-traditional, and a sea of "hat acts" followed his lead. "When I heard George Strait in the early '80s, that was it. I said, 'There's my way: country music,'" Garth recounted to *Playboy*.

It was Garth himself who ultimately toppled his hero's reign. Their approach couldn't have been more different—Strait was quiet and stoic, standing in place onstage and making few public comments—but the way he upended the system was exactly the example that Garth needed to see to help fuel his path forward.

THICKER THAN BLOOD

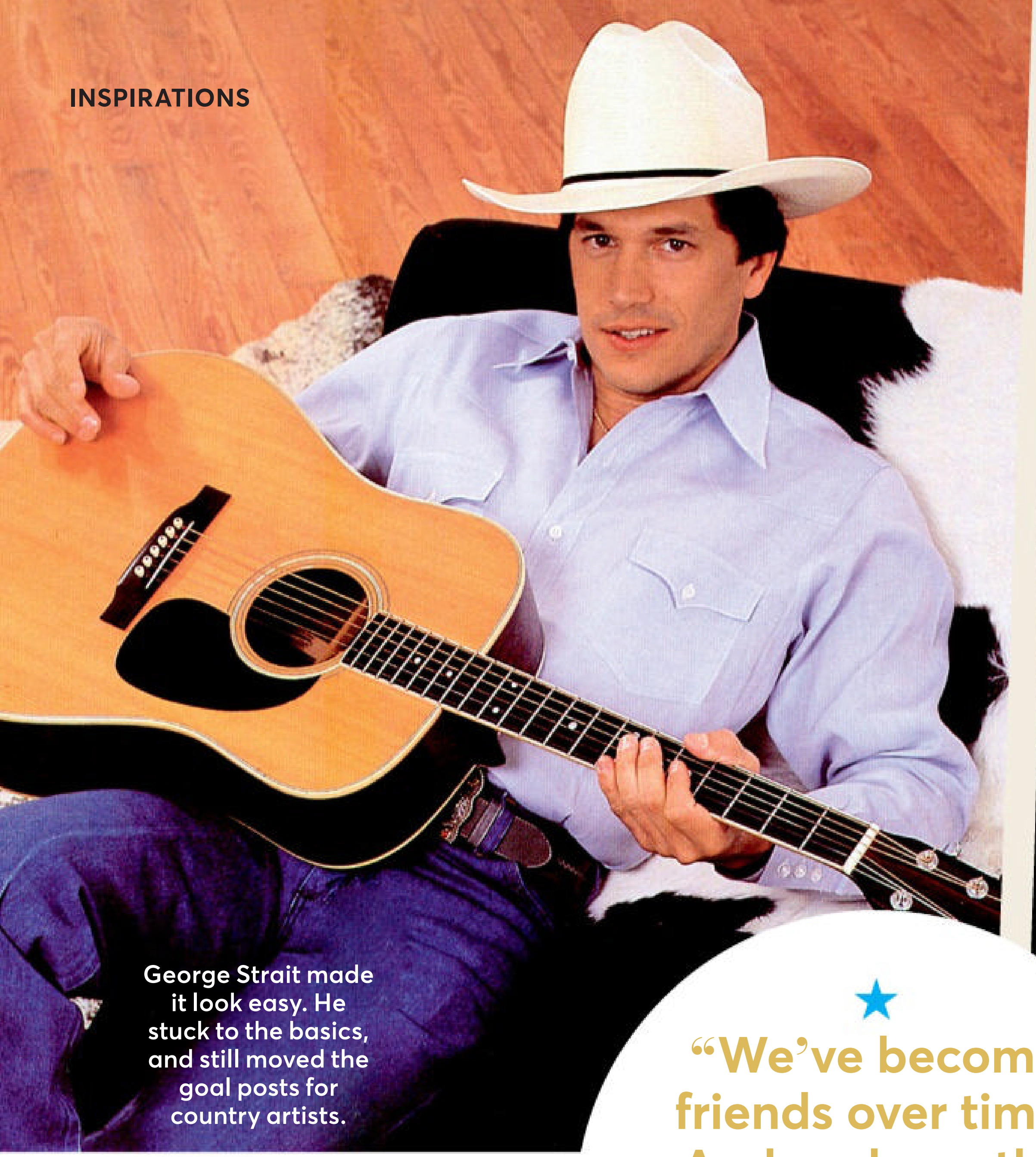
These artists, from glam rockers to real-life rodeo stars, helped shape Garth Brooks' musical tastes and stage persona.

KISS Though not exactly the type of band that would usually spring to mind when contemplating the influences of a country music megastar, KISS had a huge bearing on a young Garth Brooks' sensibilities—particularly his sense of showmanship. The New York rock quartet were famous (and infamous) for their face paint, matching studded space suits and high platform boots. They were also trailblazers for their heavy use of pyrotechnics during their glammed-up live shows. Garth eventually got to live out one of his dreams by joining the makeup-free KISS onstage at *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* to sing the group's "Hard Luck Woman" in 1994.

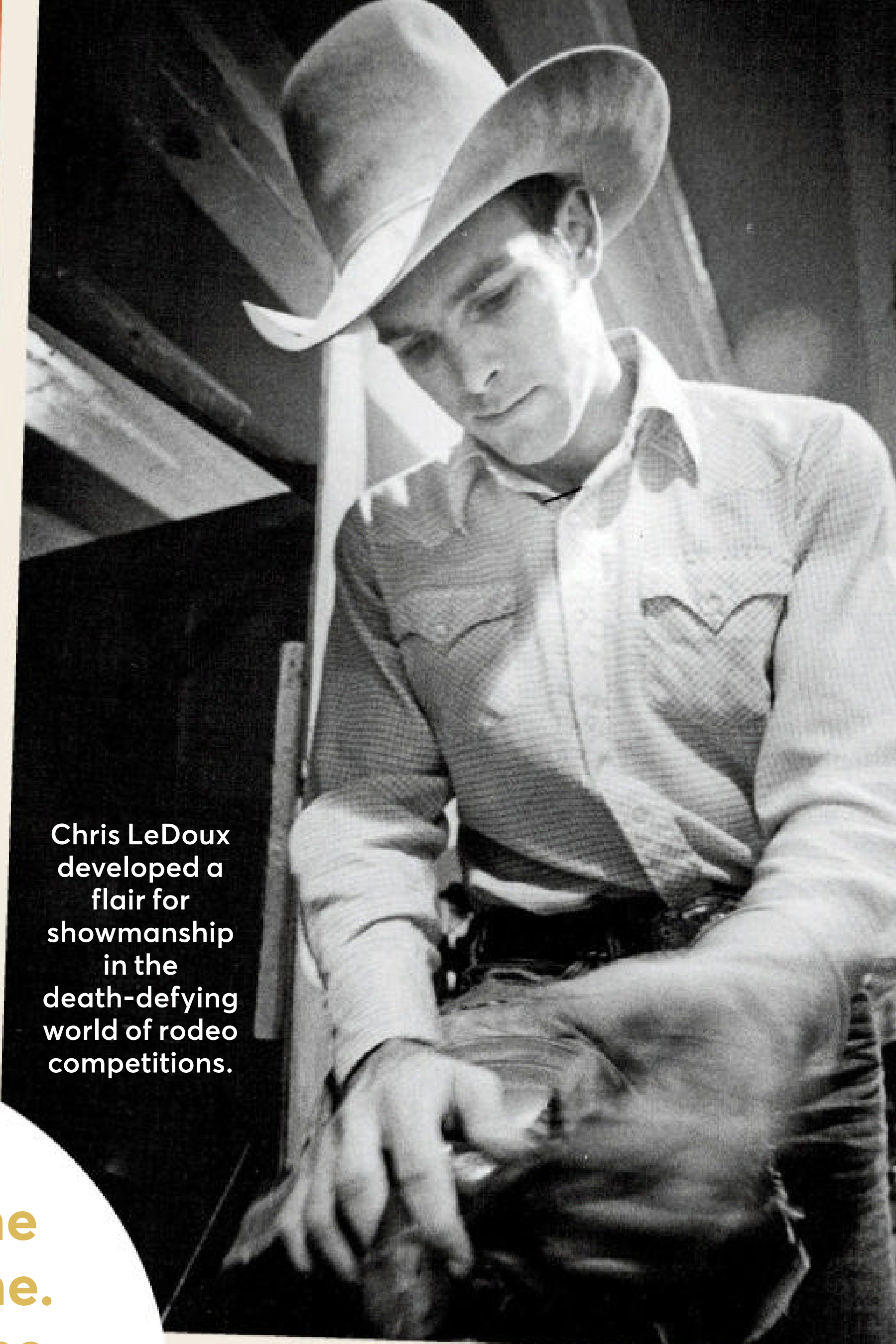
Queen Much like KISS, this English band was the height of '70s stadium rock pomp, and Garth was especially drawn to the flamboyance of operatic singer and frontman Freddie Mercury. Garth's middle school girlfriend even surprised him with a pair of tickets to one of the group's shows for his 13th birthday. "We were both insecure as hell," Garth said of Mercury, who died from AIDS complications in 1991. "Through the music, we found our courage." He later included a cover of Queen's "Somebody to Love" on his *Blame It All on My Roots* box set, released in 2013.

KISS scored hits with classic rock anthems like "Rock and Roll All Nite" and "Detroit Rock City."

Queen's charismatic frontman Freddie Mercury (far left) was a particularly relatable figure for a young Garth Brooks.



George Strait made it look easy. He stuck to the basics, and still moved the goal posts for country artists.

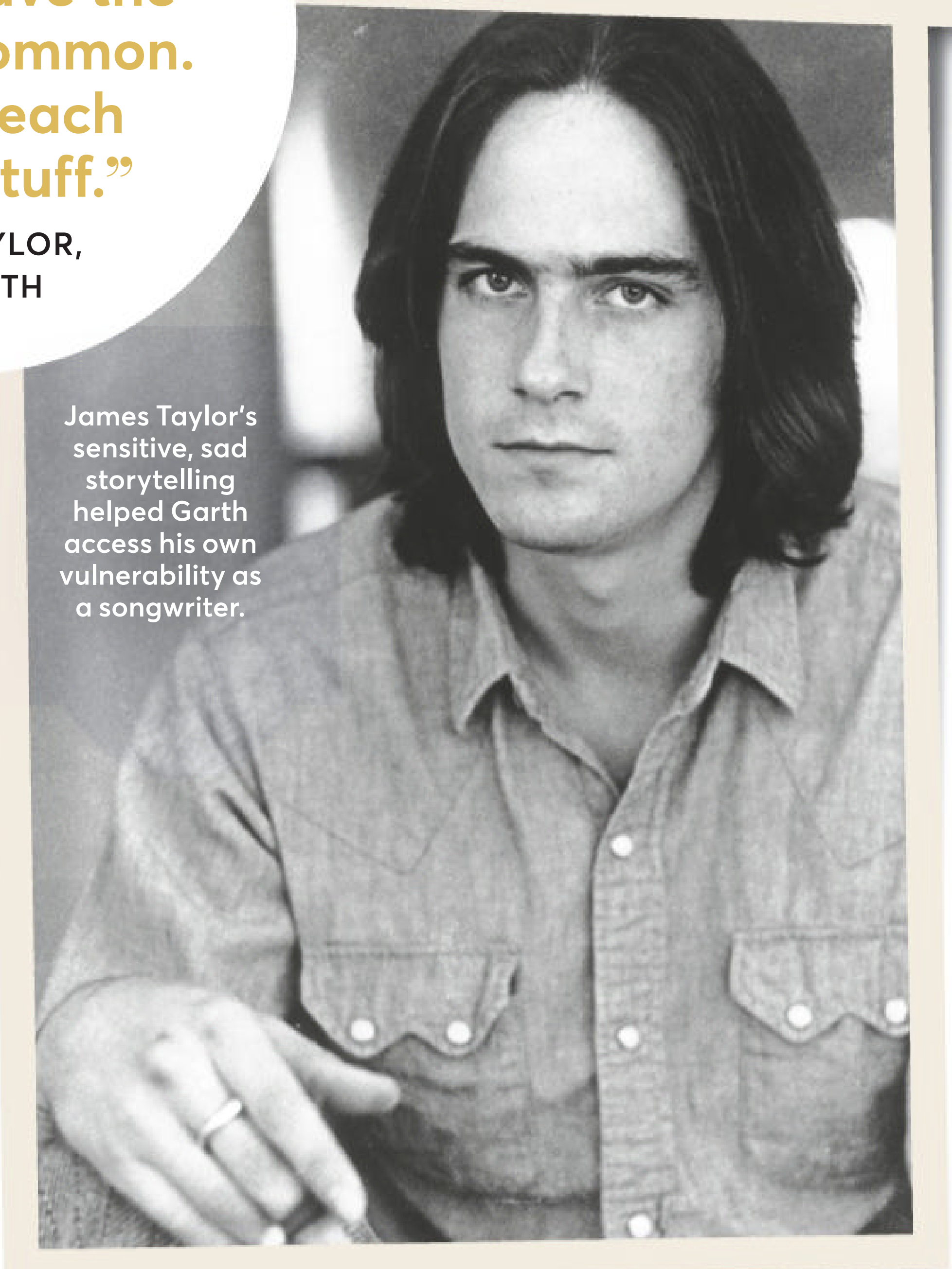


Chris LeDoux developed a flair for showmanship in the death-defying world of rodeo competitions.

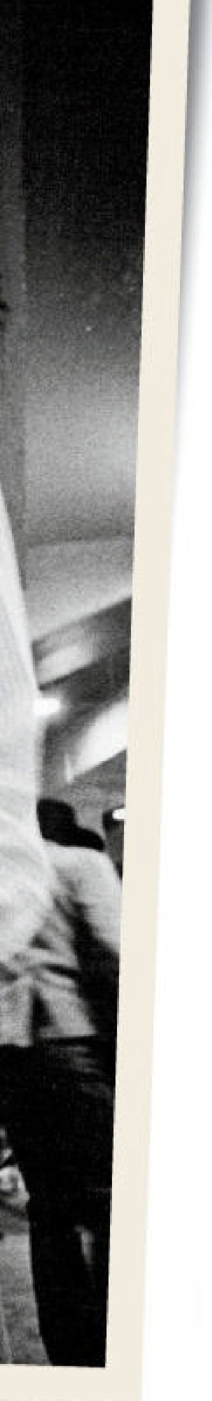
> “We’ve become friends over time. And we have the music in common. We like each other’s stuff.”
>
> JAMES TAYLOR, ON GARTH

George Strait The counterpoint to all those larger-than-life classic rockers, George Strait prided himself on not having to rely on any fancy production or stage routines. He did little more than stand in place and sing his songs, but that was enough to make him the biggest box-office draw in country music throughout the 1980s—basically, that is, until Garth came along. Strait’s back-to-basics style and love for Western swing kicked off the neo-traditionalist movement that Garth tagged onto, and Strait’s runaway commercial success—he still holds the record for the most U.S. country No. 1 singles, with 60—set the template for the ’90s crossover boom.

Chris LeDoux A bona fide real-life cowboy from Mississippi, Chris LeDoux was a rodeo star in the 1970s who won the bareback riding championship at the National Final Rodeo in Oklahoma City in 1976. Having retired from the rodeo and settled in Wyoming, LeDoux built a loyal regional following as a country singer with a live show that included fireworks and a mechanical bull. Garth was enamored after seeing him play. “I stole my whole act from Chris,” he told *American Cowboy*. He returned the favor by name-dropping LeDoux in “Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old),” which propelled his hero to mainstream country success.



James Taylor’s sensitive, sad storytelling helped Garth access his own vulnerability as a songwriter.



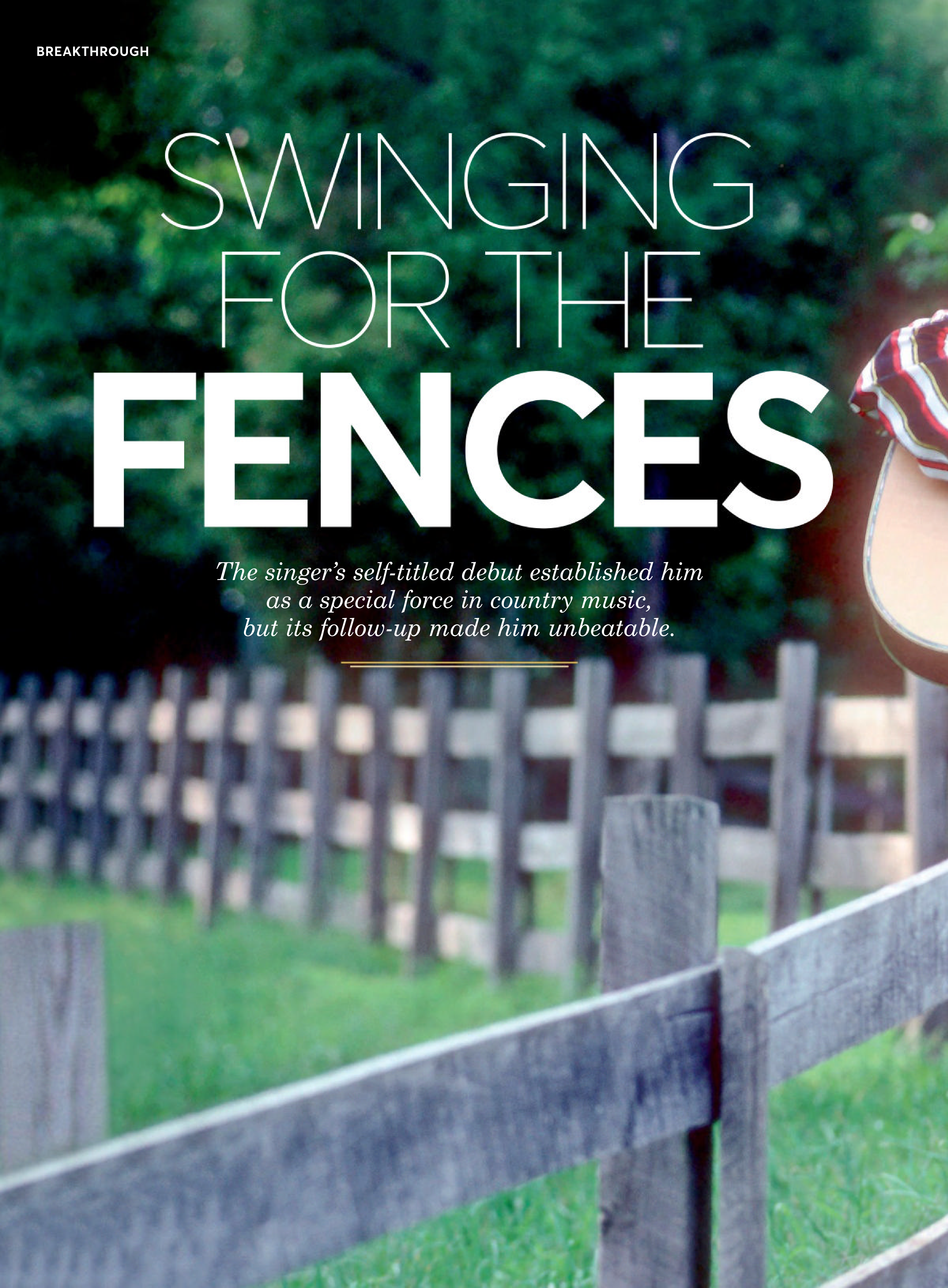
James Taylor For all of the big personalities that populate Garth's favorite music, he's equally a sucker for the heartfelt emotional ballad. Few artists can get to him as much as James Taylor, who rode high on the pop charts when Garth was growing up in the '70s with easy-listening hits like "Fire and Rain" and "You've Got a Friend." As Garth once shared, "Whenever I'm depressed, I still go into a room and put on an album by Dan Fogelberg or James Taylor. That's what music is for, to create emotion." The two singers performed at each other's Kennedy Center inductions, and Garth even named his eldest daughter after Taylor.

Garth was joined by the Eagles, Vince Gill, Donna Summer and others on *A Tribute to Dan Fogelberg*.

Dan Fogelberg The Illinois native was another singer-songwriter who Garth often spoke of in the same breath as Taylor. Though Fogelberg didn't enjoy the level of commercial success that Taylor did, he nonetheless became an easy-listening mainstay in the late '70s and '80s, scoring No. 1s on the adult contemporary charts with tracks like "Longer," "Leader of the Band" and "Make Love Stay," and was featured in the influential *Urban Cowboy* film starring John Travolta. Garth later covered Fogelberg's "Phoenix" on a 2017 tribute album, which came 17 years after Fogelberg's death from prostate cancer.

Billy Joel If Garth has a doppelgänger in rock 'n' roll, it may well be Billy Joel. The "Piano Man" from Long Island, New York, was never afraid to be a cheeky, fun-loving ham, and he could write a hell of a pop song regardless of whether or not the critical cognoscenti took him seriously. But Joel holds a particularly unique place in Garth's fandom: Garth actually took a cover of one of Joel's songs, "Shameless," to No. 1 on the country chart when he cut it for his blockbuster *Ropin' the Wind* album in 1991. "My hope is that Billy, as writer, hears this cut and goes, 'Yeah, man, the guy's got balls,'" Garth wrote in the liner notes to *The Hits* compilation album three years later. The two duly struck up a friendship, with Joel joining Garth at his Central Park show in 1997 and Garth returning the favor to duet "Shameless" at Shea Stadium 11 years after that.

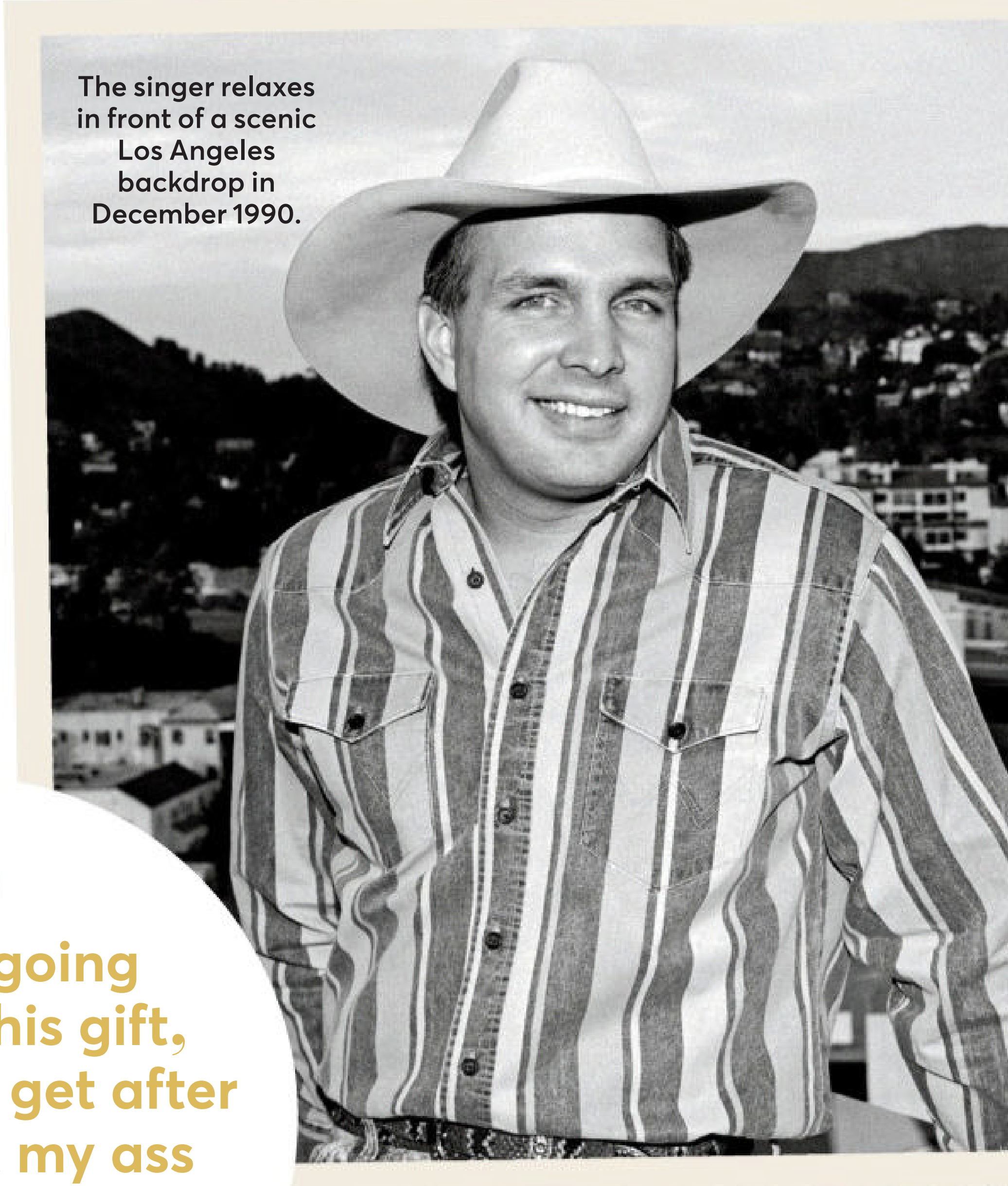
Billy Joel cut "Shameless" for 1989's *Storm Front*, the same album that included "We Didn't Start the Fire."



SWINGING FOR THE FENCES

The singer's self-titled debut established him as a special force in country music, but its follow-up made him unbeatable.

Garth Brooks, then a country music rising star, poses in Nashville, Tennessee, in August 1991.



The singer relaxes in front of a scenic Los Angeles backdrop in December 1990.

GARTH BROOKS HAD A CERTAIN KNACK FOR thriving as an underdog, and as he prepared to record his first album for Capitol Records in 1988 he had everything to prove. Capitol was a relatively minor player in the country world, but in producer Allen Reynolds the ambitious young singer had a perfect partner to help take on the world.

Bob Doyle, Garth's manager, hand-picked Reynolds, an understudy of "Cowboy" Jack Clement, who got his start with Sun Records in the 1950s. Reynolds worked out of Jack's Tracks Recording Studio in Nashville, Tennessee, and insisted on sticking with analog equipment and minimal overdubs despite the growing trend toward digital recording and editing techniques. That philosophy suited Garth just fine. "There's an angel missing in heaven and his name is Allen Reynolds," the singer enthused to biographer Patsi Bale Cox. Together the two of them began sorting through the box of demo tapes the singer brought with him and assembled a team of studio musicians to back him up.

The result of their efforts, *Garth Brooks*, was released on April 12, 1989, less than a year after Garth had made his handshake deal with Lynn Shults at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville. Garth, ever modest about his own songwriting abilities—too modest, in the opinion of most who worked with him—preferred to balance the track list out with others' compositions, but it was his own songs that truly stood out on the album.

"Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)" was the first single to be released and it performed respectably though not earth-shatteringly well, petering out in the 40s of the country chart. Radio stations, the biggest power brokers in songs and artists scoring hits in country music, shied away from playing a song with a curse word, and were quick to take it out of rotation. Garth was distraught. "I'm laying there in the fetal position, saying, 'This can't be,'" he told *The Orange County Register*. But Doyle refused to give up, hiring an independent advertising firm to help juice promotion. With their help, the song vaulted to No. 8. Garth had his first hit.

★

"If I am going to justify this gift, I'm going to get after it and bust my ass for the time [God] has given me."

GARTH BROOKS

His next single, "If Tomorrow Never Comes"—released in August 1989—put him over the top. Helped by a melodramatic music video that featured Garth's wife, Sandy, as the female lead, the song became the calling card for Garth as a new, complex kind of country frontman, one who wore his emotions on his sleeve and who wasn't afraid to be compassionate or comforting. By December, the song had reached No. 1.

During the summer, he hit the road with his touring band, Stillwater, for which he called up his old college friend Ty England to join the fray. Garth had the opportunity to play some high-profile gigs as an opening act for country icon Kenny Rogers, who was just entering the downturn of his commercial fortunes but remained a popular concert draw. Rogers' warmth and kindness toward his supporting acts had a profound impact on

garth brooks

The artist's self-titled debut arrived on Capitol Records in the spring of 1989 and rose gradually to classic status.

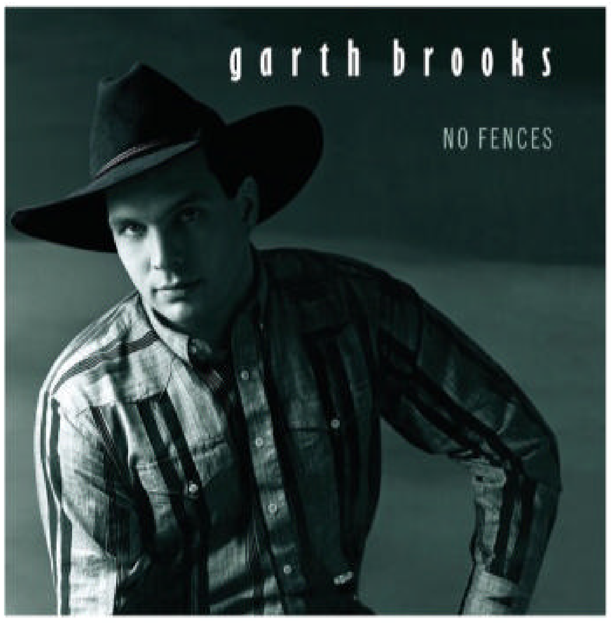
Equipped with his signature headset, Garth acknowledges a crowd at a gig in California on June 28, 1991.

Garth moving forward. “No matter how big Garth’s career got, I never saw him do anything less,” Doyle once said.

Garth Brooks, meanwhile, was met with positive critical response, though it remained something of a sleeper hit throughout that year. As one of the genre’s leading newcomers, Garth faced stiff competition. Unusually so, in fact: He was part of the vaunted “Class of ’89,” which included debutants Clint Black, Travis Tritt and Alan Jackson. All four singers had a traditionalist bent and were dubbed “hat acts,” a label Garth didn’t appreciate. Critics tried pitting the newcomers against one another, building up a rivalry in particular between Garth and Black, who was undeniably the most successful of the group—at least initially.

Black seemed to be everything that Garth wasn’t: A handsome, stylish cowboy from the big city of Houston. His debut, *Killin’ Time*, spawned five No. 1 country singles, and stayed at the top spot on the albums chart for 31 weeks. Black eventually collected Male Vocalist of the Year honors. But Garth wasn’t interested in a rivalry. “There’s no conflict between Clint and me—why act like there is?” he asked. “I love Clint Black music and I hope he likes mine.”

By year’s end, *Garth Brooks* sold a respectable 300,000 copies, not a bad start for an unknown singer on a relatively underpowered label. Then came a sea change: Jim Bowen, one of the many executives who passed on Garth just a couple years prior, took over as Capitol chief and cleared out the staff—including Shults.



The artist definitely didn’t suffer a sophomore slump. His second album, *No Fences*, was his first to go to No. 1 and was destined to be his bestselling studio album.

1 Garth sits on the hood of his Chevrolet pickup at his home in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1992. He drove the same truck when he moved to Music City with wife Sandy in 1987. **2** No fences, no fronts: The star exhibits unbridled joy during a concert at the University of Nevada in Reno, Nevada, on June 8, 1992. Sometimes his excitement got the better of him: At an awards show the year prior, he remarked, “I want to thank God. He’s done a hell of a lot for me.” (He later apologized for the gaffe.)

Bowen had come to see the light about Garth. "I really screwed up," he confided to Reynolds. "I didn't get what a talent Garth Brooks is."

In February 1990, a third single, "Not Counting You," was released and went to No. 1. In order to capitalize on its success, the label quickly followed up with "The Dance," which was Garth's true watershed moment. Helped again by a smash hit music video, the song was destined to be one of his defining cuts—if not *the* defining one. "The Dance" became a phenomenon, racing to No. 1 and fueling a huge boost in album sales. Within a month of the song's release, *Garth Brooks*' numbers had tripled to over 1 million copies. It would ultimately be the bestselling country album of the '80s.

That remarkable change in fortune primed Garth to release his second album, *No Fences*, which was waiting in the wings. Bowen felt the analog production sounded outdated, but fans clearly had no such qualms: Released in August 1990, it went to No. 1 on the country chart, selling 700,000 copies in the first 10 days. Far more unusually by country standards of the day, it reached No. 3 on the *Billboard* 200 pop chart, remaining in the Top 40 for 126 weeks.

All four of *No Fences*' singles topped the charts, beginning with "Friends in Low Places," a rowdy party anthem that rivaled "The Dance" as Garth's signature tune—though cut from a very different cloth. The song's freewheeling, beer-guzzling attitude exhibited a much different side from his previous singles, helping to fill out his public persona and further broaden his appeal to a rapidly expanding fan base. Others like "Unanswered Prayers" and "The Thunder Rolls" strengthened his emotional underpinnings, while furthering his music video celebrity, proving that he was a multifaceted talent with a firm grasp on the growing influence of television.

If *Garth Brooks* was a sleeper hit, *No Fences* was the knockout punch. *Time* magazine called it "a direct assault on the heartstrings," while *USA Today* raved that there was "no limit for Brooks." Garth cleaned house at that year's awards ceremonies, taking home Album of the Year, Single of the Year, Music Video of the Year and Entertainer of the Year from both the Academy of Country Music and the Country Music Association, with the ACMs naming him Male Vocalist of the Year. *No Fences* went on to sell a certified 18 million copies according to the Recording Industry Association of America, making it the bestselling country album of all time.

There was no doubt about it: Garth was no longer an underdog. He was king of the heap. And as things transpired, he was nowhere near his peak.

MOVING PICTURES

The emerging music video business was key to the artist's rise.

AS COUNTRY MUSIC ushered in a new breed of talented stars in the late 1980s, it grappled with trying to modernize its approach. Nashville, Tennessee, had never quite had the same commercial impact as rock or pop music, but it was getting there. Television was one of the key ways to make that happen.

Music videos had long been a tool used for promotional purposes by major labels, but the system wasn't codified in any meaningful way until the launch of MTV in 1981. It quickly became a vital marketing tool that helped launch pop singers like Michael Jackson and Madonna into new levels of fame, with the cable channel boasting 30 million viewers within a few years' time.

Nashville, inevitably, followed suit, with CMT launching its own 24-hour feed of country programming in March 1983. It beat its chief competitor, TNN, by just two days, and together the two stations ushered in a new era for the genre, helping give artists a fresh way of reaching new audiences.

Garth Brooks was especially savvy when it came to this developing medium, and his biggest hit songs were all fueled in part by popular and acclaimed videos. Like Jackson in the pop world, Garth's videos were hailed as mini movies, well thought out stories with depth and character. "My videos are real life," he insisted, "and they're meant to add another dimension to the song." At the same time that his singles ruled the radio airwaves, he became a mainstay of video award categories, an auteur in song and on the screen. His peers couldn't compete.

His natural presence and showmanship would go on to serve him well in other TV ventures, and as his fame grew in the 1990s Garth solidified his commercial stronghold with a succession of hit concert specials.

CMT

COUNTRY MUSIC TELEVISION

First wife Sandy Mahl was a steadying influence as the singer took on, and took over, the country music world.

IN A TWIST FROM MOST OTHER love stories, Garth Brooks' relationship with his first wife, Sandy Mahl, started with a fight. But not between them, fortunately: Garth was working as a bouncer at Tumbleweed Ballroom in Stillwater, Oklahoma, when he had to break up a brawl between two women. One of them had thrown a punch at the other. She missed, and got her fist stuck in the wall. That woman was Sandy.

Sandy, it turned out, was also a student at Oklahoma State University, where Garth was a senior. She was three years his junior, born on Jan. 16, 1965, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she spent most of her youth before heading to Stillwater for college. The two began dating, and Garth would later tell the *Chicago Tribune* that her support was instrumental in getting him to stick with his passion for playing music. "I owe everything to God and her," he said.

That didn't always stop him from straying from his commitment to her, however. When Garth made his humiliating trip to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1985, he did so without even telling Sandy he was going. All the same, Garth found her indispensable, and the following spring, on May 24, 1986, the couple were wed in Oklahoma.

★

> "She's a fireball, a great woman who's every bit a lady but don't take nothing off nobody—'specially me."
>
> GARTH BROOKS

For the next 14 years, Sandy would be a bedrock to her husband, whose meteoric rise to fame in the first few years of their marriage would forever alter their relationship—and ultimately make it untenable. "I don't think either of us had stopped to think how this would change our lives," Sandy admitted in the 2019 A&E special *Garth Brooks: The Road I'm On*. During his first major tour in support of his debut album for Capitol Records, 1989's *Garth Brooks*, the entertainer was called out by friends for sleeping with other women while on the road. Sandy made an ultimatum: Stop fooling around or lose me. Garth, contrite, agreed to bring Sandy with him on the road.

For years to come, the couple would be nearly inseparable in the public eye, as she joined him at all his major offstage engagements, like awards shows. Sandy even became an artistic collaborator with her esteemed husband: She co-wrote "I've Got a Good Thing Going" with Garth for his self-titled debut, and later rekindled their songwriting partnership on 1992's "That Summer," from *The Chase*, which became a country No. 1. She also made music video cameos.

TWO OF A

Sandy Mahl (seen in her 1983 Owasso, Oklahoma, senior photo, opposite) shows up her husband's outfit as they arrive at the Academy of Country Music Awards in Los Angeles in May 1995.

KIND

The proud parents show off their second daughter, August, at the Hollywood Bowl in the summer of 1994.

GARTH BROOKS
THE LION KING
HOLLYWOOD BOWL

In a 1993 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Garth fessed up to his infidelities, admitting that, when he made his first foray to Nashville, he imagined himself as a superstar singer and ladies' man. When he married Sandy, he figured he'd settle down—only to give into temptation once given the chance. "I don't see [unfaithfulness] as a necessity," he insisted. "Anybody starting out saying, 'Man, this has to happen'—bulls---. It doesn't."

As Garth's touring commitments expanded in the 1990s, so did his family. First came a daughter, Taylor, in 1992, who proved to be an exceptionally difficult pregnancy, as Sandy endured numerous health issues that deeply concerned Garth. August followed two years later, and a third daughter, Allie, arrived in 1996. That same year, the couple renewed their wedding vows, and Garth also embarked on his grueling second world tour, which lasted for the next two years.

Things would never be the same between Garth and Sandy again. With his wife left behind more and more to take care of the three children, the entertainer's rare time off was usually spent hosting people at home or attending parties in Nashville. By the end of his run of shows, Garth returned to a domestic life he felt deeply estranged from. "People [were] constantly wanting his attention and yanking and pulling on him," Sandy recalled. "He'd be gone eight to 10 weeks at a time.... We both grew apart really, really quickly."

In an effort to patch things up, and alarmed by how much time he felt he'd lost with his daughters, Garth agreed to move the family back to Oklahoma, where he and Sandy purchased a new estate in 2000. But before the end of the year the writing was on the wall: Come October, in the lead-up to a party organized by Capitol to celebrate their star reaching 100 million in sales, Garth admitted to an interviewer that he and Sandy were getting a divorce. His longtime producer, Allen Reynolds, insisted, "I've never seen anyone work as hard to put things back together."

Garth and Sandy's divorce was finalized on Dec. 17, 2001, with Sandy receiving an eye-popping $125 million in the settlement—one of the largest in history. The split was, nonetheless, an amicable one, with the two staying on friendly terms as Sandy settled into a private life where she stayed well out of the public eye to focus on raising her children. She has never remarried, but did give her blessing when Garth and his longtime duet partner, Trisha Yearwood, eventually tied the knot in 2005.

Around the same time, Sandy battled breast cancer, which she ultimately recovered from. In 2006, she also endured a frightening abduction where a local fugitive broke into her estate and forced her to act as a getaway driver, though she managed to escape without harm. In recent years, she's devoted herself to her passion for wildlife, serving as co-founder and vice president of Wild Heart Ranch, a wildlife rehabilitation center in Rogers County, Oklahoma. "My respect and love for her is through the roof," Garth told Fox News in 2019, "for what she went through and how she's handled it."

THE APPLES OF HIS EYE

The legend's three daughters never fail to surprise—or impress—their proud father.

AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS fame in the 1990s, Garth Brooks wasn't afraid to be uncool. He was, in fact, the antithesis of the prima donna star: With his wife, Sandy, and his daughters in tow, he could usually be found spending his free time on the road visiting the nearest zoo rather than tearing up a hotel room.

Garth and Sandy made a point of keeping their children down-to-earth, despite the wealth he'd accrued by the time they were born. "Ever since I was a kid, my dad has taught me basically one lesson, which was to put your head down and work," youngest daughter Allie told *American Songwriter* in 2021.

Taylor, the oldest, proved to be the most private of the three Brooks daughters. Like her parents, she attended Oklahoma State University, then entered seminary school at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. She's also lent a hand to Garth and stepmom Trisha Yearwood on their frequent Habitat for Humanity builds.

Superdad Garth Brooks brings his kids with him to the People's Choice Awards in January 2001.

Allie Colleen Brooks, who takes her middle name from her grandmother, is the third generation of Garth's family to become a professional singer.

Middle daughter August had the distinction of making her superstar father a grandfather. She gave birth to daughter Karalynn in 2013, when she was still only 19. She subsequently married Chance Michael Russell, her high school sweetheart and Karalynn's father, and the two had a second daughter together in 2016, Gwendolyn.

Allie, however, is the one who has opted to follow in her father's bootsteps by pursuing a career in music. Garth insisted that she couldn't do so until after she'd finished college—just like he'd done. After she graduated from Belmont University in Nashville and married Jonathan Roberts, a gym teacher, she went on to release her first album as a singer-songwriter, titled *Stones*, in 2021.

"They got the right amount of their mom in them, the right amount of me in them, and the right amount of Trisha's influence in them as well," Garth told Fox News in 2019. "So I think everything happens for a reason."

Garth Brooks saw his star rise even higher in the '90s, and he quickly became a full-blown musical phenomenon.

WITH THE WIND AT MY BACK

Already riding a hot streak, the talented artist became a pop music icon with the help of a realignment in the industry.

AS THE 1990S GOT INTO FULL SWING, GARTH Brooks had the world at his fingertips. Riding high on the breakthrough of his sophomore album, *No Fences*, he geared up for what promised to be a year of taking things to the next level: At last, 1991 would see his first tour as a headlining artist.

But there were hiccups around the corner. For the last single of *No Fences*, "The Thunder Rolls," Garth was hell-bent on making a statement with the song's music video. In particular, the video showed in stark terms the reality of domestic abuse, including a scene where a wife was brutally beaten. Released in April 1991, the video sent shockwaves through the country music world. CMT banned it from rotation.

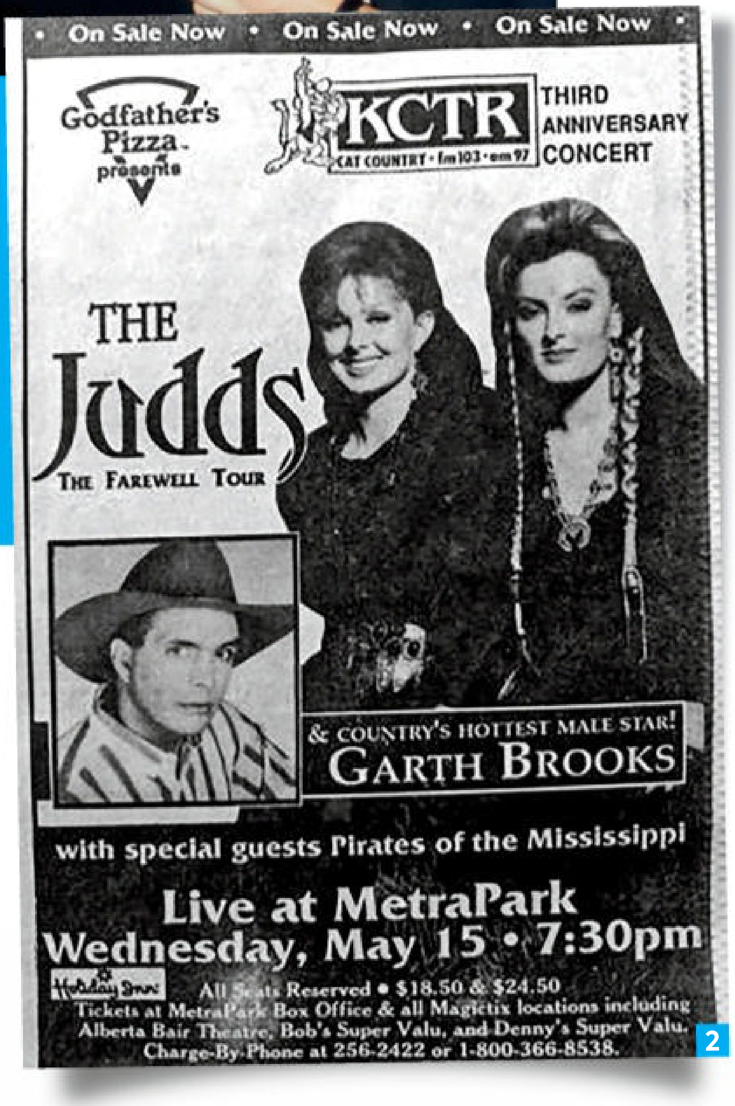
Despite the backlash that came from some quarters, Garth received praise for the bravery of his convictions, and in particular for shedding light on domestic abuse. "I refuse to do a video that is ordinary," he declared, according to Patsi Bale Cox's book *The Garth Factor*. "It wastes the viewer's time and mine, and my label's money." The controversy made headlines in the mainstream press, driving his popularity even further forward. Garth was already a singular force in the business, the figurehead for a new wave of artists taking over the charts.

If that defied convention, and opened up debates about his country bona fides, then it opened him up to a whole new fan base, with whom he insisted he could personally identify. "I am just a mirror of them," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Maybe they see themselves in me...and they say, 'Hey, you don't have to be this ungodly person to make your mark on life. You just got to be yourself.'"

This all came against the backdrop of his first headlining tour, which kicked off that February. Opening for him was his trusted duet partner, Trisha Yearwood,

1

1 Garth was never too busy to sign autographs for his fans, once doing so for nearly a full 24 hours. Here he is on Jan. 30, 1995, at the American Music Awards at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. **2** Mother-daughter duo Naomi and Wynonna Judd brought the up-and-comer along for their farewell tour.



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who began her own ascent with the release of her self-titled debut album for MCA Records that July. Already there were rumors swirling around the two singers, whom onlookers suspected were romantically involved—a fact not helped when Trisha divorced her first husband that same year.

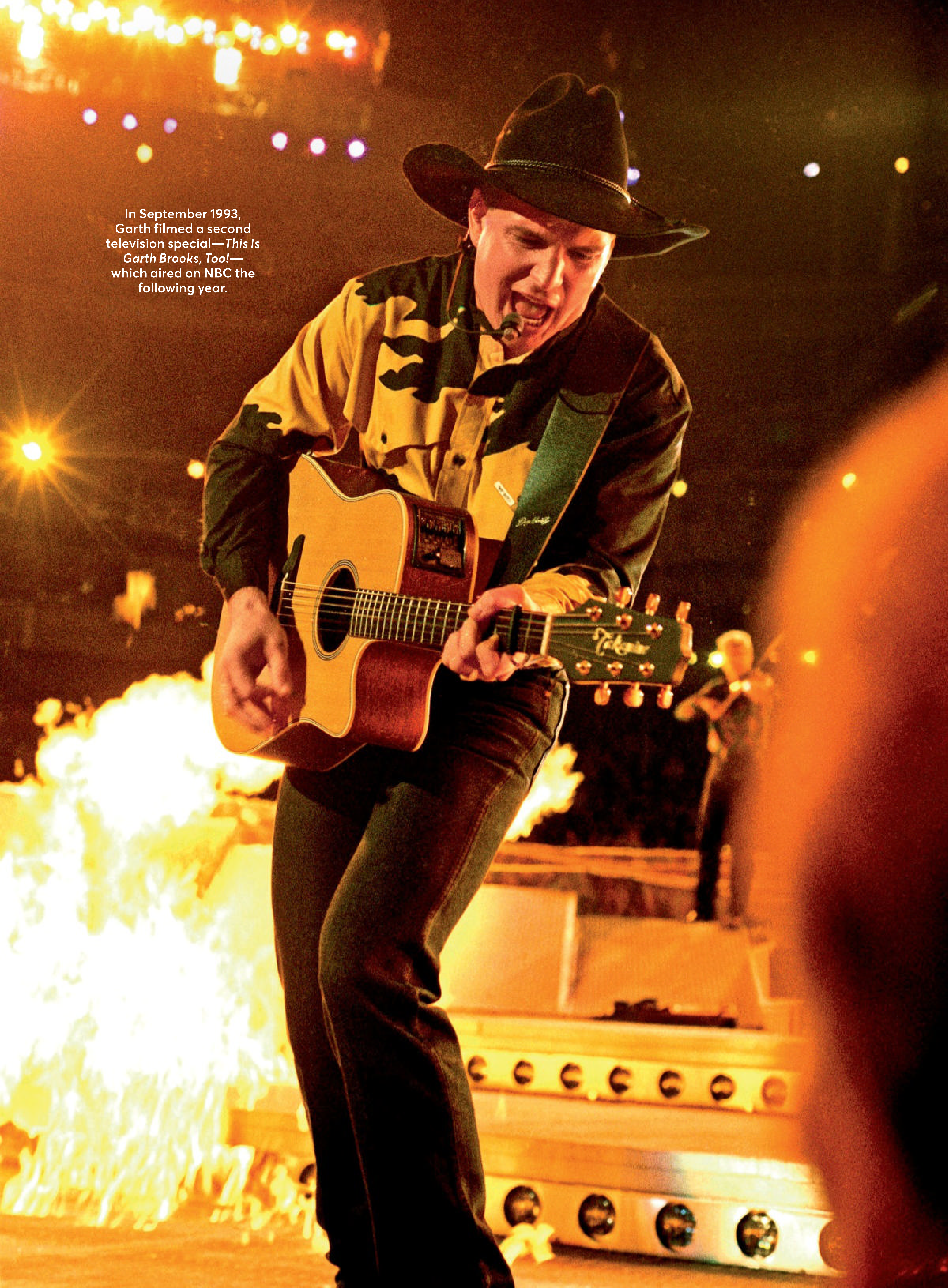
Garth's own tour wasn't his only commitment on the road, either. Between his headlining dates he was also hired as an opener for The Judds' blockbuster farewell tour, which would go down as the highest-grossing country tour to that point and wrap up with a widely watched farewell concert special that December.

In fact, Garth had filmed a concert special of his own that fall, doing so during a series of shows in Dallas in September. The special eventually aired on NBC in January 1992, giving the network its best Friday night showing in two years. Garth's live performances had already become an integral part of his presentation, raising production levels and entertainment value to never-before-seen levels in country music, and the special helped show a wider audience what he had to offer.

But an ever bigger change took place behind the scenes that would alter country music forever and catapult Garth from country music darling to a mainstream megastar. In May 1991, *Billboard*, the industry leader for tracking music sales that also boasted the definitive chart rankings, announced that it would implement a new tracking system using a service called SoundScan. Rather than the traditional honor system that the industry had been built upon, whereby record stores reported sales figures based on their own tabulations, SoundScan used barcode data to compile total sales around the country.

Country music had never been able to compete with genres like rock 'n' roll, but with the advent of SoundScan its artists saw an immediate bump. Garth, for instance, saw *No Fences* vault from the Top 20 to the Top 5 of the *Billboard* 200, and there were several of his peers who weren't too far behind.

While that should've been a harbinger of what was to come, no one in the business—Garth included—was prepared for what would happen when his next album, *Ropin' the Wind*, arrived that September. Though Garth himself considered it a sibling of sorts to its predecessor, the album had been created under far more difficult and challenging circumstances, with the overbooked artist squeezing in time to write and record as best he could between jam-packed tour commitments. ("We were gone pretty much 250 days out of the year," he recalled.) Yet it managed to be another bold statement, and while its first single, "Rodeo," only hit No. 3, three others went to the top of the chart: a cover of Billy Joel's "Shameless," plus "What She's Doing Now" and "The River."



In September 1993, Garth filmed a second television special—*This Is Garth Brooks, Too!*—which aired on NBC the following year.

LET FREEDOM RING

"We Shall Be Free's" pro-LGBTQ message got it banned from country radio, but earned Garth wider praise as an activist.

THE CONTROVERSY surrounding Garth Brooks' music video for "The Thunder Rolls" showed that he was not only a singer of principle, but one who was willing to stand up for his convictions no matter how the public—or the country music establishment—reacted. Barely a year later, he backed it up with his song "We Shall Be Free," which included a nod to LGBTQ equality.

Until that point, every one of Garth's 13 singles had reached the Top 10 of the country chart. "We Shall Be Free," which he co-wrote with longtime writing partner Stephanie Davis, was the opening track on *The Chase* and its lead single. A series of radio stations refused to play it, so the song petered out in 12th place.

But Garth wasn't to be deterred. "We Shall Be Free" came from a heartfelt place for the artist, who was inspired to write it during a visit to Los Angeles in April 1992, when he witnessed first-hand the violence of the Los Angeles riots, which erupted after the outcome of the Rodney King trial. "As you drove out of LA you could see the buildings on fire," he said. "It was pretty scary stuff."

There were other things on Garth's mind, too, though. His half-sister, Betsy Smittle, herself a musician who played guitar in his touring band, was a lesbian. Thus "We Shall Be Free" addressed an array of human rights issues, from racism to homophobia to homelessness. Despite the radio ban, the song boasted a star-studded music video with cameos by Jay Leno, Whoopi Goldberg, Joan Rivers and Elizabeth Taylor. Garth would later perform it on TV shows like *Muppets Tonight* and even at President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009.

Garth's activism through the song would earn him a GLAAD Media Award in 1993, and today it's considered one of his most enduring messages.

More important than the singles was how the album itself did. *Ropin' the Wind* sold 400,000 copies in its first week, and achieved the unprecedented feat of debuting at No. 1 on both the country and pop charts. No country artist had ever done that before. Now he was going head to head with the biggest acts in the music business, and winning: In reaching No. 1, *Ropin' the Wind* knocked Metallica's "Black Album" from the top spot. And when Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion II* subsequently bettered it, *Ropin' the Wind* promptly went back to No. 1, staying there for a total of 18 nonconsecutive weeks—a run that finally ended in April 1992.

Garth's runaway success was part of a broader sea change that reshaped popular music. Two weeks after *Ropin' the Wind* was released, Nirvana debuted *Nevermind*, and soon grunge would overpower the then-popular hair metal acts and even the "King of Pop" himself, Michael Jackson. For country music, it was a watershed. Artists like Reba McEntire, Clint Black, Vince Gill and Billy Ray Cyrus—whose "Achy Breaky Heart" caused its own furor early in 1992—all vied for mainstream audiences. As *Billboard* observed, "Brooks' socko debut suggests that it's time to recognize that country fans can also be active and committed."

The singer's older sister, Betsy Smittle, joins him on an episode of *The Tonight Show* on Aug. 30, 1993.

Now the primary sales driver for his label, Capitol Records, Garth wanted to renegotiate his contract for a bigger share of the rewards. This once again brought him into conflict with his boss, Jim Bowen, who had leveraged his star's success to rebrand the Nashville division Liberty Records but nonetheless refused to give him a bigger cut. Bowen's bosses, however, saw things differently, and in a landmark deal gave Garth total control, whereby the singer would

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>
> **“[Fame] is like sex and pizza: Even when they’re bad, they’re still pretty good.”**
>
> GARTH BROOKS

With his heart on his sleeve and his face in his hands, Garth gets up close and personal with his fans at the Target Center in Minneapolis in 1994.

GARTH
BROOKS
ROPIN' THE WIND

Three albums deep and already firmly in the record books: *Ropin' the Wind* gave the star his first No. 1 pop album and sold 14 million copies.

waive the typical recording advance in favor of a bigger cut of sales and the ability to keep ownership of all his masters. No major artist had ever managed something like that before. “I did that simply because I couldn’t expect somebody [else] to stand up and ask for what I thought was right,” he said, according to *The Garth Factor*.

He thus entered 1992 on a high, even as he laid low during a break in his touring, which stretched on until the end of the year. His wife, Sandy, was pregnant with their first child; daughter Taylor was duly born that July. He then proceeded to release two albums in the next two months: *Beyond the Season*, his first Christmas album (and a No. 2 on both the country and pop charts), and *The Chase*, the hotly anticipated follow-up to *Ropin’ the Wind*.

Like its predecessor, *The Chase* debuted at the top of both charts and sold over 400,000 copies in its first week. Ultimately it didn’t reach the same heights, despite spawning two more No. 1s. Written in the midst of a deeply reflective time, Garth delved into his emotions, later admitting that he sacrificed some of the hooks in the process. “This is as much me as anybody has ever seen,” he said at the time.

He’d more than earned that indulgence. Yet there remained greater heights to be scaled, not just at home but in other parts of the world.

ESSENTIAL GARTH

This one's for you: Garth Brooks addresses "Ain't Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)" directly to his fans during a 2016 tour stop in New York.

Here are the stories behind 10 of the icon's most enduring songs.

"Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)"

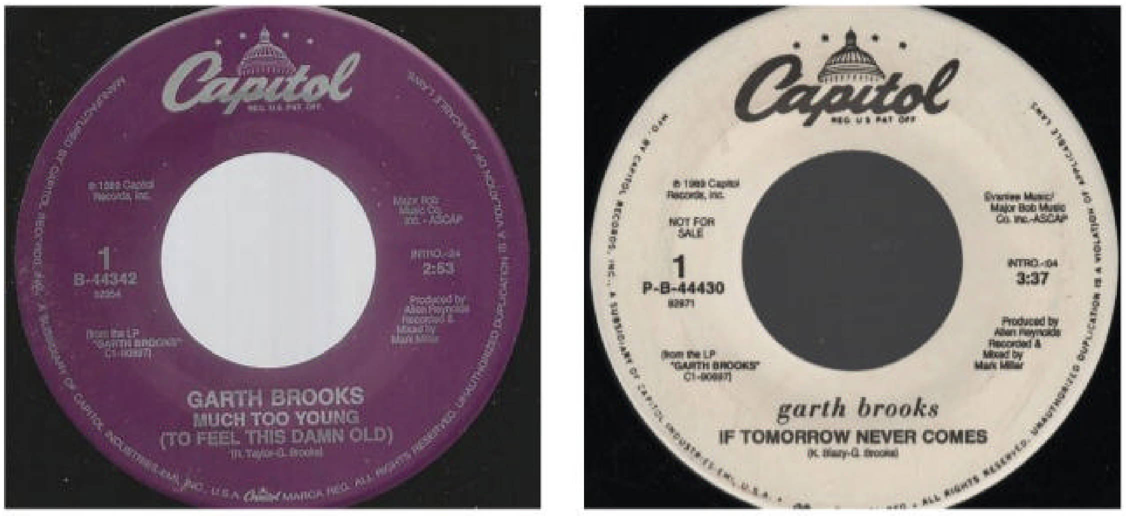
***Garth Brooks* (1989)**

One of the songs that Garth Brooks brought with him to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1987, "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)" was originally supposed to be about a road-weary musician. "That's pretty good," his friend Randy Taylor told him. "But it could be better." Taylor suggested that what it needed was a cowboy. So Garth flipped the script and opted to use one of his heroes, ex-rodeo champion Chris LeDoux, as the inspiration for the main character. It was to be a stroke of genius: As the first single Garth released, it established him as a country singer with a very unique sort of authenticity, one that evoked the Great Plains and America's heartland. LeDoux got name-checked directly in the song, a fact that Garth claimed helped give himself some credibility, but it proved mutually beneficial: With Garth's help, LeDoux signed his own Capitol Records contract, and the two later collaborated on 1992's "Whatcha Gonna Do With a Cowboy."

"If Tomorrow Never Comes"

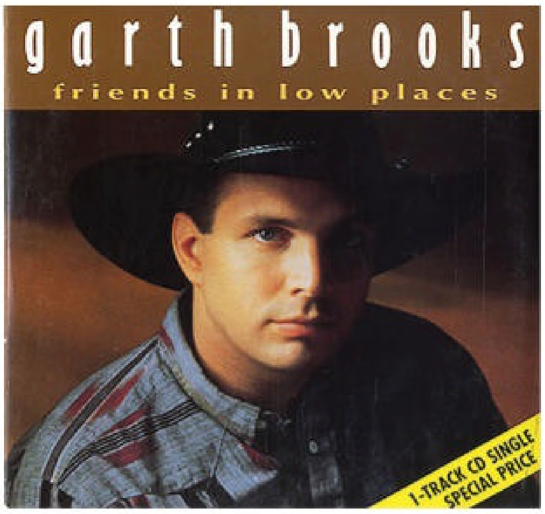
***Garth Brooks* (1989)**

Another cut that Garth had come up with before he left Oklahoma for Music City, it didn't come to life on the page until he met Kent Blazy. Garth had tried shopping the idea around to several other songwriters in Nashville, none of whom took an interest in it. But when he had his first meeting with soon-to-be-manager Bob Doyle, Doyle introduced him to Blazy. "He had the first verse down within 15 seconds. I could tell he just felt it," Garth recalled in the liner notes to *The Hits*, a 1994 compilation album. Though the finished product grew into a rumination on a father imagining what life would be like for his daughter once he's gone, the roots of "If Tomorrow Never Comes" laid in the real-life deaths of two of Garth's close friends from college, Jim Kelly and Heidi Miller—a onetime roommate of Garth's—who died in a plane crash and car accident, respectively, in the mid-'80s. As his first love song and slow ballad and his first No. 1, it would hold a pivotal place in his musical development.



His first two singles were classics, straight out of the gate: "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)" and "If Tomorrow Never Comes" both dropped in 1989.

GARTH BROOKS
THE DANCE
FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES



Capitol
NASHVILLE
GARTH BROOKS
THE THUNDER ROLLS

Beginning with "The Dance" and "Friends in Low Places," Garth had a run of five straight No. 1 singles that ended with "The Thunder Rolls." In between came "Unanswered Prayers" and "Two of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House."

"The Dance"

***Garth Brooks* (1989)**

Picking out one singular song as Garth's defining hit is a near impossible task, but "The Dance" would probably be your best bet. The singer has even said so himself, telling *Playboy* in 1994, "I'll go to my grave with 'The Dance.' It'll probably always be my favorite song." Ironically, it took some convincing to get him to include it on his self-titled debut, where it appeared as the closing track and would ultimately serve as the final single. The song was penned by songwriter Tony Arata, who later wrote Clay Walker's 1994 No. 1 "Dreaming With My Eyes Open" and Garth's "The Change," which reached the top two years after that. Still, when the time came, Garth and producer Allen Reynolds insisted it would be a perfect single, and its overwhelming success set him up for the one-two punch of "Friends in Low Places." It also earned him his first Song of the Year award from the Academy of Country Music in 1990.

"Friends in Low Places"

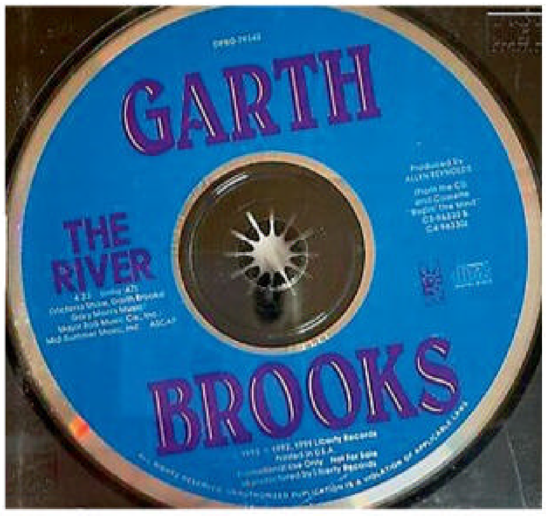
***No Fences* (1990)**

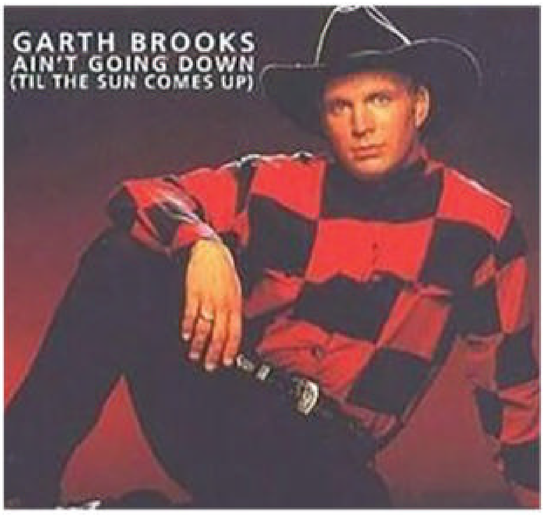
Garth's debut album did its job in establishing the up-and-comer as a singer and songwriter of great emotional depth and nuance, but with the heft of "The Dance" helping put him over the edge he needed to show fans his fun, carefree side. "Friends in Low Places" did that, and then some. It's hard to imagine his catalog, much less one of his live shows, without this woozy, infectious sing-along, which got its title from a dinner that co-writer Earl Bud Lee had with a friend. "Don't worry," the pal said when they got the check. "I have friends in low places. I know the cook." So it's not surprising that its runaway success actually started as a word-of-mouth campaign: Radio disc jockeys latched onto the track before it had even been released as a single, thanks to Garth's mother Colleen accidentally leaking it, and soon listeners were calling into stations demanding to hear it played. Garth sang it as a demo prior to his debut album, and it was recorded first by singer David Wayne Chamberlain.

"The Thunder Rolls"

***No Fences* (1990)**

Though inextricably linked with the music video that stirred up so much controversy, "The Thunder Rolls" was yet another of Garth's original compositions from his early days in Nashville. And, like "Friends in Low Places," it initially was given to another artist—in this case, no less than outlaw bad girl Tanya Tucker, who recorded it in 1988 for that year's *Strong Enough to Bend*. Tucker, uniquely, asked for an additional verse to be added, which Garth and his co-writer, Pat Alger, duly accommodated her on. Yet Tucker ultimately decided against including the song on her album, which came as a relief to Reynolds. "That's one of the most powerful songs I've ever heard!" he insisted. So Garth cut





"The River" and "Ain't Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)" came just two years apart, but found the artist at very different points in his career.

High plains drifter: The artist strolls the property of his home in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1992.

★

“I just happen to be somebody who sings who happens to work a little bit with a pen.”

GARTH BROOKS

the song himself, minus the extra verse, for *No Fences*, with Alger joining in on acoustic guitar. After being released as a single in April 1991, the song became Garth's fifth straight country No. 1.

"The River"

Ropin' the Wind (1991)

Besides being a world-class entertainer and all-around good guy, Garth is also a tireless cheerleader for his legions of fans to pursue their dreams and live their best lives. Never was that clearer than on "The River," the standout track from his sensationally successful third album, *Ropin' the Wind*. Ever intent on finding new imagery in his writing and inventive ways to articulate some of the world's biggest ideas, the song uses its namesake as a metaphor for the creative process and the pursuit of one's dreams. "I live by this song every day and hope it gives courage to people who have ever been in a fight they didn't know they could finish," Garth said. He co-wrote it with one of his favorite writing partners, singer-songwriter Victoria Shaw, with whom he later penned the No. 1 "She's Every Woman." Trisha Yearwood also covered Shaw's "Where Your Road Leads" in 1998, with Garth providing backing vocals.

"Ain't Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)"

In Pieces (1993)

After the deep introspection of *The Chase*, his fourth album, Garth was looking to loosen up again when it

★

"It was amazing to me that Garth ever questioned his songwriting. He spoiled me for newcomers."

KENT BLAZY,
CO-WRITER

Garth delivers the goods during the CMA Music Festival in Nashville, Tennessee, on June 8, 2017.

GARTH BROOKS
Two Piña Coladas
“To Make You Feel My Love” from the motion picture Hope Floats
GARTH BROOKS
TO MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE
GARTH BROOKS
MORE THAN A MEMORY

The star was already on the far side of prime hitmaking years when he recorded “Two Piña Coladas” in 1997. His final two No. 1s came with “To Make You Feel My Love” and “More Than a Memory,” nearly a decade apart from each other.

came time to cut *In Pieces*. So it was that he turned to two of his best friends to help him get there, Blazy and Kim Williams, with whom he’d previously collaborated on the freewheeling cheatin’ song “Papa Loved Mama” off *Ropin’ the Wind*. The three men were relaxing on the front porch of Blazy’s new home in Nashville when they got to talking. “We wanted to write something that was fun, for no other reason than just that: fun,” Garth said. Right there and then they wrote this story about a girl who stays out past her curfew and winds up getting grounded because of it. “Ain’t Goin’ Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)” was a no-brainer as the album’s lead single, and didn’t disappoint by heading straight for No. 1 in September 1993.

“Two Piña Coladas”

***Sevens* (1997)**

If “Two Piña Coladas” seems to effortlessly evoke warm vibes and visions of relaxing on the beach, that’s no accident: The song was cut on a particularly cold and dreary day in Nashville by Shawn Camp, Benita Hill and Sandy Mason, who wanted nothing more than to escape to someplace sunny. Not surprisingly, they figured it would be perfect for Mr. Piña Colada himself, Jimmy Buffet, but Allen Reynolds had other ideas. He insisted it would be a good fit for Garth, who had no trouble leaning into the party atmosphere and took the song right to No. 1 when it was released as a single in March 1998. He liked the song so much that he picked up another of Hill’s compositions, “Take the Keys to My Heart,” which helped Hill pay off her credit card debt. It was a boost for Camp as well, who had another chart topper later that year with Brooks & Dunn’s “How Long Gone” and later wrote hits for Blake Shelton, Josh Turner and George Strait.

“To Make You Feel My Love”

***Hope Floats: Music from the Motion Picture* (1998)**

This Bob Dylan cover isn’t necessarily the most obvious choice as a Garth Brooks classic, and Garth himself agreed—at least at first. The song was brought to him by *Hope Floats* director Forest Whittaker and the soundtrack’s producer, Don Was, who saw it as the anchor track for this romantic drama starring Sandra Bullock and Harry Connick Jr. “I don’t hear this as a Garth Brooks song,” he mused. But when Garth sat down with the lyrics he began to appreciate its simplicity. Dylan had released it on his late-period comeback *Time Out of Mind*, and Garth fave Billy Joel had already covered it. The country star gave one of his all-time great performances as a vocal interpreter, really delving into the emotional space left open by Dylan’s spare lyrics. The song served as the soundtrack opener and was bookended by another recording of the song by none other than Trisha Yearwood. It has since become a modern standard, made more famous still by the likes of Adele.

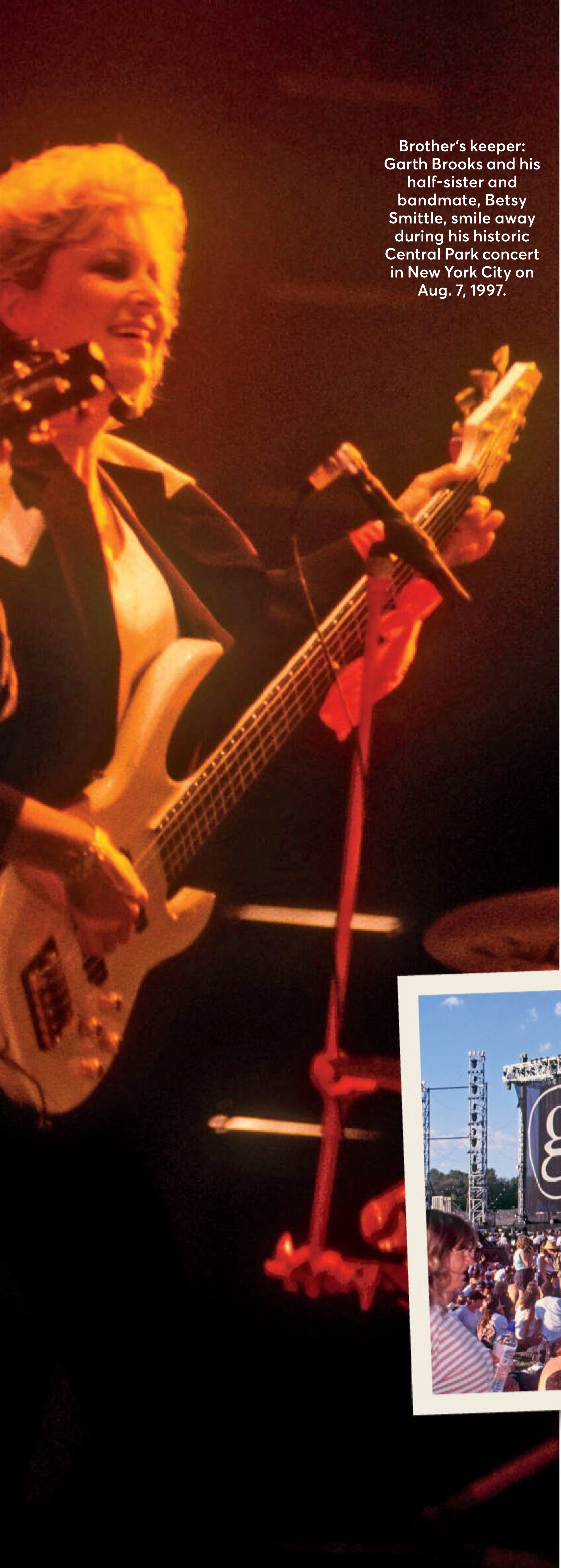
“More Than a Memory”

***The Ultimate Hits* (2007)**

After “To Make You Feel My Love,” the well ran dry on No. 1 hits for Garth, for whom it would’ve once seemed impossible to believe he’d ever be anywhere other than the top of the charts. In the nearly 25 years since that song was released, the country king has had just one more No. 1 single to his name, bringing his career total to 19. That came courtesy of his 2007 cut “More Than a Memory,” one of four new songs that were recorded especially for that year’s *The Ultimate Hits* compilation. Only three of his singles had cracked the country Top 10 since the Chris Gaines fiasco (see page 58), so “More Than a Memory” was nothing less than a special bonus later on in his career: It debuted at No. 1, remarkably making it the first song ever to do so on the country chart, and the only one to do it based solely on radio airplay. (The metric would later be changed to include streaming figures.) The tune also marked a breakthrough for one its writers, future country hitmaker Lee Brice.

UNANSWERED PRAYERS

At the peak of his powers, Garth Brooks began to feel the pressures of celebrity during his megaselling world tours of the mid-'90s.



Brother's keeper: Garth Brooks and his half-sister and bandmate, Betsy Smittle, smile away during his historic Central Park concert in New York City on Aug. 7, 1997.

BY THE BEGINNING OF 1993, GARTH BROOKS' wildest dreams of fame and fortune had all come true. *Entertainment Weekly* had named him one of the most powerful people in the entertainment industry and put him on the cover of the magazine—as did *People*, *Time* and several others. In February, he was also invited to sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl, the biggest single-day sporting event in the world.

His most recent album, *The Chase*, had fallen somewhat below his sky-high expectations, but that was a relative concern: It still achieved Diamond status, meaning more than 10 million units sold, the fourth of his albums to do so.

For all that, however, Garth's relationship to his own fame was beginning to change. That summer, *Rolling Stone* put him on the cover as well, and in a wide-ranging interview the artist opened up like never before, speaking frankly about some of his inner demons and growing struggles with stardom, including thoughts of retirement.

"Tons of Garth bashers are saying: 'He makes $44 million a year. What's his problem?' " he said. The difficulty, he explained, was having to hit the road in order to support his young family. "I have more money than my child's grandkids are going to be able to use, so I felt bad about leaving."

On the eve of a new tour—his first world tour—that kicked off in July, there was a fresh controversy brewing. His next album, *In Pieces*, was due out in August, but he was dissatisfied with record stores reselling used albums, which he felt unduly hurt artist's royalties. He thus forced Capitol Records not to distribute the new record to any of

The singer's pay-per-view broadcast of the Central Park gig was HBO's most-watched original programing of the year.

those stores. Some outlets then filed an antitrust lawsuit against Garth's distributor, among others, and won.

In Pieces, nonetheless, was hailed as a return to form by critics, a looser, friendlier affair that dropped the heaviness and introspection of its predecessor. "Ain't Goin' Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)" offered more of the party-friendly vibe that fans had grown fond of, and duly sparked the first of two No. 1 singles from the album, which followed the recent trend of Garth's efforts by topping both the pop and country charts upon its debut.

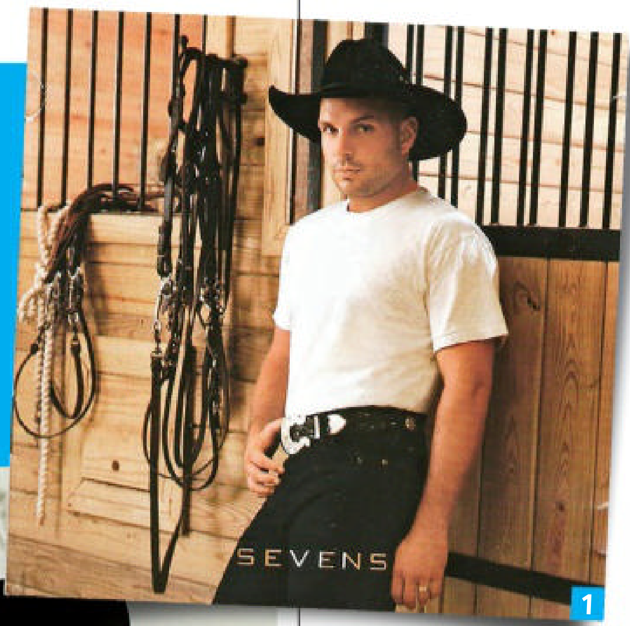
The new album also became a hit overseas in the United Kingdom. None of Garth's prior albums cracked the Top 40 in the U.K., but *In Pieces* went all the way to No. 2. The timing was more than serendipitous: In March 1994, Garth headed to Ireland for his first legs of shows outside the United States, and for the remainder of the tour—spread over much of the next six months—he traveled through Europe and to Australia and New Zealand.

This was more than an ordinary tour; it was an ambassadorial journey. Country music had never found firm footing internationally, being the subject of particular ridicule in England, but Garth's enormous sales made it the perfect time to test the waters. He found much to dislike, though, upon his arrival: Journalists dressed up in gimmicky cowboy hats and spoke in mocking drawls, all of which tested Garth's patience. "It was the worst I ever felt as a human being, to have to sit there and take that," he told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. But the fans adored him, and one radio DJ even affectionately dubbed him "Garth Vader" for the way he'd invaded the British Isles. (When he triumphantly returned to the U.K. in September 2022 for five historic sold-out shows in Ireland, he dropped to his knees on the first night as he choked back tears, telling the crowd, "We came back.… I love you.")

Garth's run of shows in 1994 would be a breakthrough for country music, and upon his return he was celebrated as a hero. He was even honored by the Academy of Country Music with the Jim Reeves Memorial Award, given to those who make a profound impact for the genre. He also reached 50 million records sold, the fastest any artist had ever done so.

But more trouble was brewing. Behind the scenes, there was a shake-up at Capitol Records, and when his longtime boss and sparring partner, Jim Bowen, stepped down, a war of words ensued between the two. Garth's boyish enthusiasm had given way to a darker, moodier reputation, and the likes of Bowen fueled rumors of prima donna behavior on the singer's part. "Brooks seems insecure about life at the summit," opined *USA Weekend* in a chippy profile, which commented on his weight problems and receding hairline. He also had to contend with changes in internal management, as manager Bob Doyle broke up his company; Garth subsequently set up his own firm.

1 *Sevens* was a personally significant work for Garth: His seventh album released in the seventh year of the decade. (His birthday is also on the seventh.)
2 After the relative disappointment of *Fresh Horses*, *Sevens* returned him to the top of the heap, including garnering him a couple American Music Awards in 1999.



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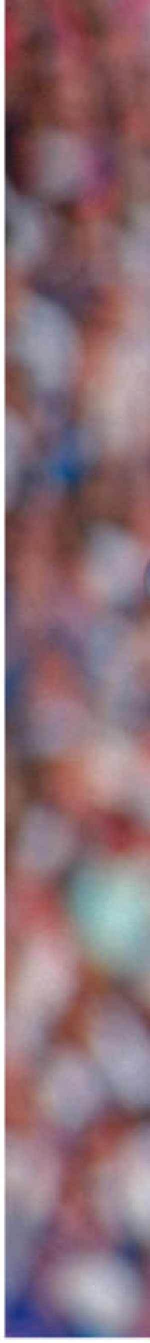
AMERICAN MUSIC AWARD
AMERICAN MUSIC AWARD

2

After two years without new music, his next album, *Fresh Horses*, proved a letdown. Though it started strong by selling nearly a half-million copies in its first week in November 1995—the best any of his albums had done yet—Capitol's support sputtered, and so too did sales. Though it predictably topped the country albums chart, it came up short at No. 2 on the pop chart, and while two of its six singles were No. 1s, one of them, "The Fever," was his first to fail to reach the country Top 20.

There was little time to dwell on the failure, as much as it bothered Garth, given that he was launching his second world tour the following spring. Those commitments kept him on the road almost nonstop from March 1996 to November 1998.

Nonetheless, when it came time to release his next album, Garth didn't want to leave its fate to the unsteady hands of his label. To help build up demand for



STAR-SPANGLED DRAMA

The country superstar nearly derailed the 1993 Super Bowl.

AS A MARK OF JUST HOW much Garth Brooks' influence had grown in the early 1990s, one only need look as far as the 1993 Super Bowl and the fact that he nearly brought the world's largest sporting event to a screeching halt—on live TV.

Garth had decided to use his appearance at the game, where he was asked to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," to debut the video for "We Shall Be Free," his controversial new single. "I'd be lying if I said the initial rejection of that [song's] message didn't hurt," he admitted. The video included footage of KKK members burning crosses and committing acts of violence. NFL executives reviewed the video and refused to air it, saying it was too graphic.

As it transpired, the league's bargaining power couldn't match the country star's. Garth had declined to provide a prerecorded track for the performance, so when the singer walked out 45 minutes before kickoff the league was left high and dry. They initially scrambled to find a last-minute replacement—Jon Bon Jovi was in attendance, so they held him on standby—but finally, after the start of the game had been delayed, the NFL relented and Garth got his wish.

In the end, Garth, sporting a long mullet and bushy beard, sang the anthem accompanied by hearing-impaired actor Marlee Matlin (above), who signed alongside him during the performance. It was far from the last controversy to engulf a musical guest at the Super Bowl, but it would be hugely influential: Suitably upset by the predicament they'd been left in, the NFL mandated that all future musical guests provide prerecorded tracks for their game day performances.

Sevens ahead of its planned September 1997 release, he scheduled a special concert in New York City's Central Park that August, with an accompanying pay-per-view TV special that aired on HBO. The show was a resounding success, attracting 1 million people and earning rave reviews. "Brooks' greatest gift is as a natural entertainer, and that's where he kept the focus," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. But the planned album rollout floundered, as more disruptions within the label forced its release to be pushed back two months, to November.

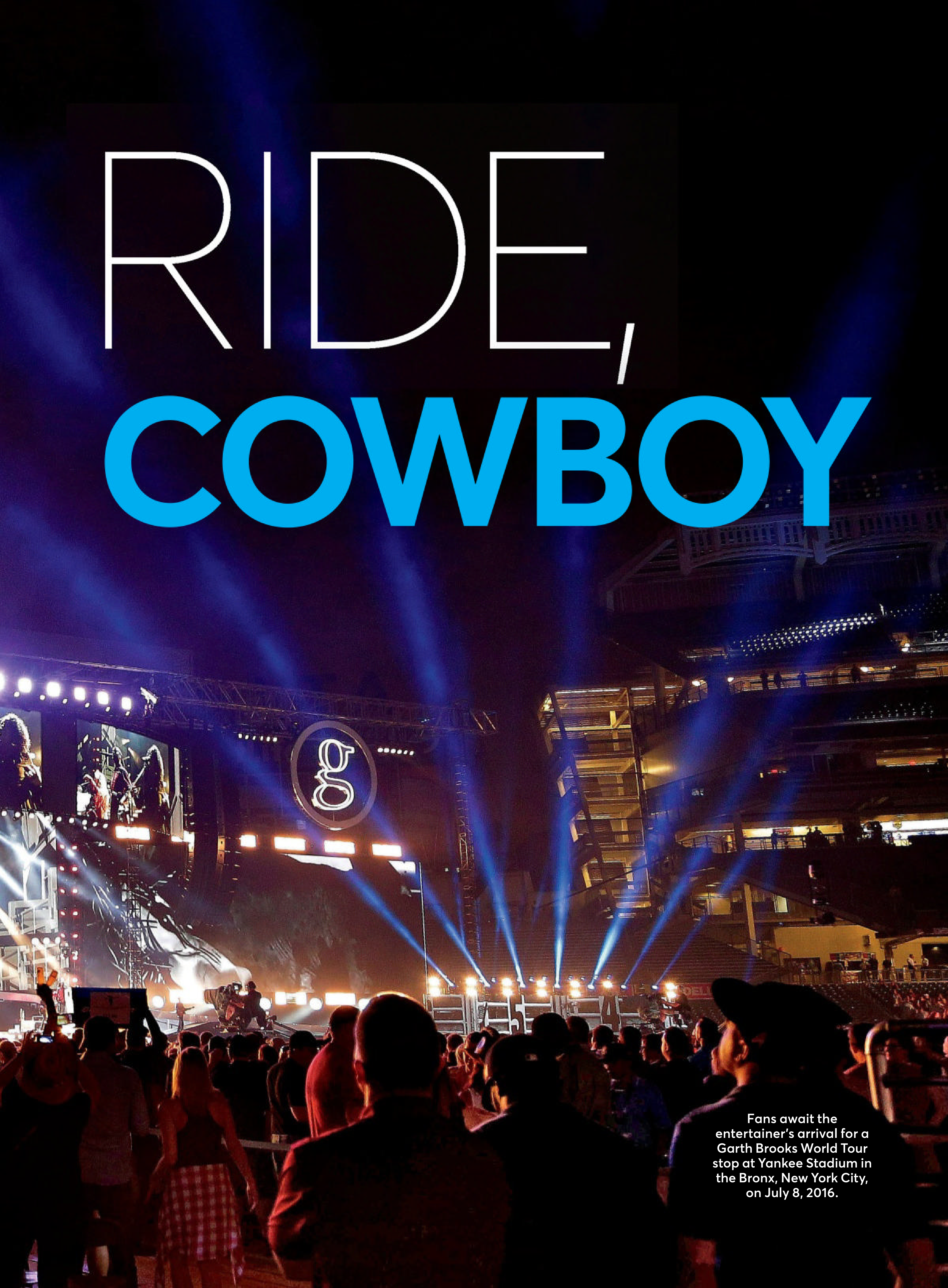
Sevens nonetheless returned him to the top of both the country and pop charts and eventually went Diamond. Besides two No. 1 singles, the album featured the hit duet "In Another's Eyes" with Trisha Yearwood, who volunteered to serve as opener during the closing leg of Garth's world tour. Along the way, he found time to host *Saturday Night Live*; the episode, which aired in February 1998, was the show's highest rated in four seasons.

At the end of an arduous run of shows, Garth could take some pleasure—or relief—at his renewed commercial fortunes. But he'd already decided that he couldn't spend so much time away from his family again. Something needed to change.

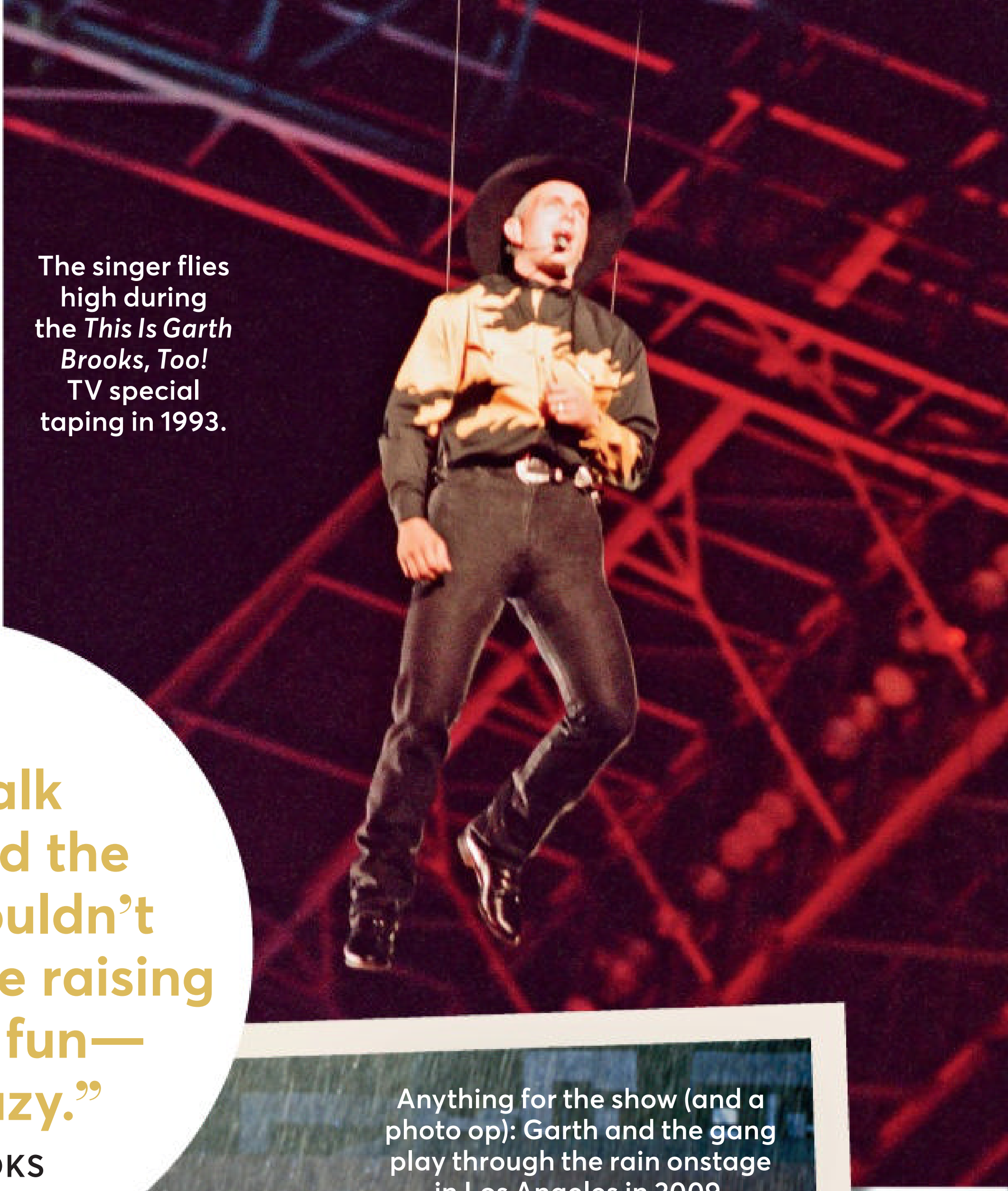
GOOD

The energetic showman shakes up the standard for country music concert tours.

RIDE, COWBOY



Fans await the entertainer's arrival for a Garth Brooks World Tour stop at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, New York City, on July 8, 2016.



The singer flies high during the *This Is Garth Brooks, Too!* TV special taping in 1993.

COUNTRY MUSIC HAS LONG BEEN OBSESSED with traditions. "Three chords and the truth," as an old saying coined by songwriting legend Harlan Howard goes, was all that you needed to make a real country tune. And for decades, that was about all a country concert consisted of: Cowboy-hatted men and skirted women standing firm onstage, delivering their beer-soaked ballads with honesty and conviction.

Garth Brooks, however, could see more than that. He could also see how that buttoned-down approach had limited country music for far too long. Well into the 1970s, artists in the genre generally embarked on regional package tours together—if they were big enough, booked in conjunction with the Grand Ole Opry—and otherwise relied on smaller gigs at country fairs or the carnival. Only a select few, like Johnny Cash, had enough clout with mainstream fans to book theater or arena tours.

> "I can walk offstage and the audience wouldn't know it. They're raising hell, having fun—they're crazy."
>
> GARTH BROOKS

Anything for the show (and a photo op): Garth and the gang play through the rain onstage in Los Angeles in 2009.

The music that Garth grew up on was vastly different, however. Beginning in the late 1960s with the advent of major festivals like Woodstock, rock and pop acts began drawing on bigger, more elaborate productions, thanks to advancements in sound and lighting systems that allowed them to perform in arenas and even on stadium stages. Artists like The Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin could play to hundreds of thousands of fans at a time, while Garth's heroes like KISS and Queen raised the standard for pyrotechnics and all-around presentation. They were the ones who helped draw Garth in in the first place, so it was perhaps inevitable that he preferred to follow their lead in his own career.

Still, as Garth was working to make a name for himself he did his best to tow the line of country tradition, devoted as he was to being welcomed by the Nashville, Tennessee, establishment. George Strait, the runaway success of the genre in the 1980s, stayed firm in his no-frills approach, and proved that the formula could make him a steady arena draw in his own right. "Originally, I was scared to move around too much onstage," Garth admitted to biographer Bruce Feiler.

Then Garth had the opportunity to tour as an opener with Chris LeDoux. He was struck by what he saw in LeDoux's approach, recalling that LeDoux would sprint onstage and vault over a pile of hay bales. "From then on, I started understanding that whatever the audience does out there, I can do back to them, and they'll send it back to me 10 times bigger," Garth said.

As the young phenom's celebrity took off, he modeled himself more and more on the pop stars of the era. Taking a page from the playbook of Madonna and Michael Jackson, he did away with the traditional microphone and mic stand and began using a wireless headset, which he attached to his cowboy hat. This gave him the freedom to move around the stage as he pleased. Duly on the loose, there were no extremes he wasn't willing to go to in order to entertain: He would swing from the rafters on a rope, smash his guitar into pieces à la The

Who's Pete Townshend, even douse himself in water. "I knew that even though I wasn't the greatest singer in the world or the best songwriter—somehow, I'd figure out how to entertain people," he reflected, in 1992.

He brought in state-of-the-art lighting systems and drew liberally on fireworks, cannon blasts and other pyrotechnics that made his concerts a sheer spectacle. Over time, the routine developed to where he would emerge through a trapdoor engulfed by flames, and other special effects—like rain or thunder noises—were added to help augment the emotion of certain songs.

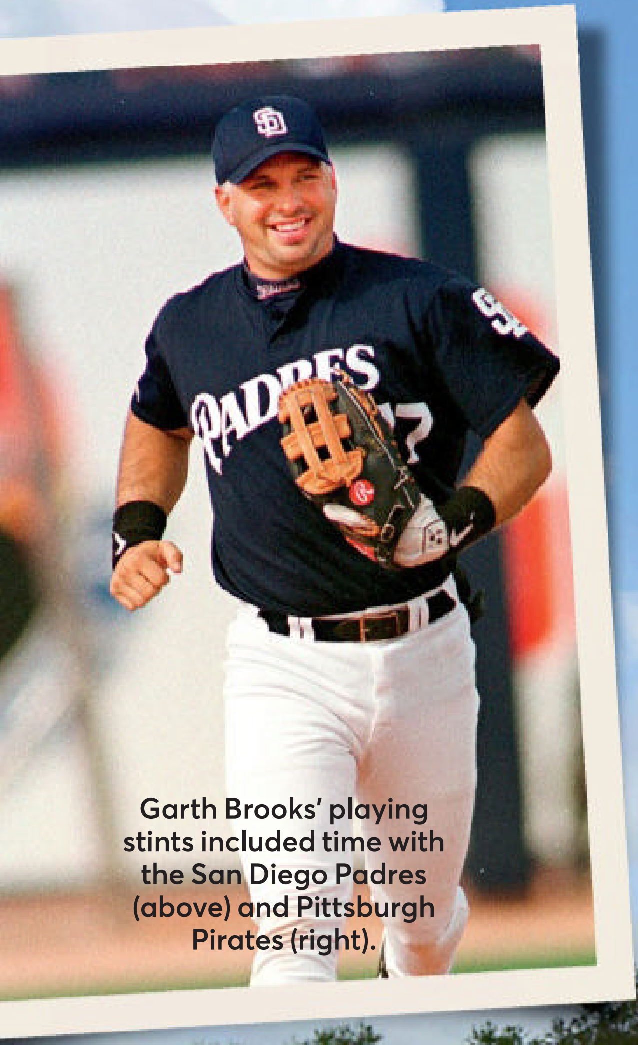
The fans loved it. Garth's tours routinely sold out in record time, and demand was so high that he had no trouble incorporating the filming of TV concert specials without making a dent to his ticket sales. When he embarked on his first world tour in 1994, he repeated the success he'd enjoyed stateside once he ventured abroad. During this run of shows he began a new tradition of announcing his tour dates at random, which he would continue through the coming years—adding an extra layer of excitement and unpredictability.

His second world tour, which stretched over 220 shows from 1996 to 1998, was his zenith of the era: It netted a staggering $105 million, making it the ninth-highest-grossing concert tour of the decade for any musical genre and, reportedly, the third-most attended of all time. In the United States, in particular, demand was so high that nearly every city the tour visited needed to add extra dates in order to accommodate. When he released an album chronicling those shows, the two-CD *Double Live*, in 1998, it sold 21 million copies.

That was to be the final tour Garth undertook before his early retirement, but when he returned to the road in 2014 he proved to have lost none of his star power. The production levels had grown even more advanced, with a comprehensive in-the-round, 360-degree stage setup that allowed him to be encircled by fans on all sides, giving him the chance to face more members of his enormous audiences at all times. The tour, done together with second wife Trisha Yearwood, grossed a staggering $364 million, making it the 15th-highest-selling tour ever and tops among country tours in history.

Guitarist Johnny Garcia (left) and fiddler Jimmy Mattingly (right) join the boss on his comeback world tour in 2016.

FIELD OF DREAMS



Garth Brooks' playing stints included time with the San Diego Padres (above) and Pittsburgh Pirates (right).

At the height of his fame, the artist got the chance to live out a fantasy by moonlighting as a professional baseball player.

BY THE LATE 1990S, GARTH BROOKS HAD already lived out a life that far exceeded his wildest dreams. But there was one dream that he'd never taken a swing at: playing baseball in the major leagues. His fame had grown to be so all-encompassing that even this fanciful idea had the chance of becoming a reality.

Garth hadn't played baseball in an organized setting since he was in high school. Even in college, where he was a varsity athlete, he'd given up the game in favor of focusing on track and field, for which he received a scholarship. ("I wore the uniform—but that's about it," he once quipped.) His love for baseball remained strong, however, and in 1998 he set up the Touch 'Em All Foundation in collaboration with Major League Baseball. The organization collected donations for various children's charities based on players hitting home runs, stealing bases or pitching strikeouts.

He wasn't alone among country stars who flirted with professional baseball, either. In fact, others had come closer: Conway Twitty, the man who held the record for the most No. 1 country singles prior to George Strait, was drafted by the Philadelphia Phillies straight out of high school, but he never played due to serving in the Korean War. Charley Pride was a pitcher in the Negro American League in the 1950s, and continued playing in the minors until his singing career took off.

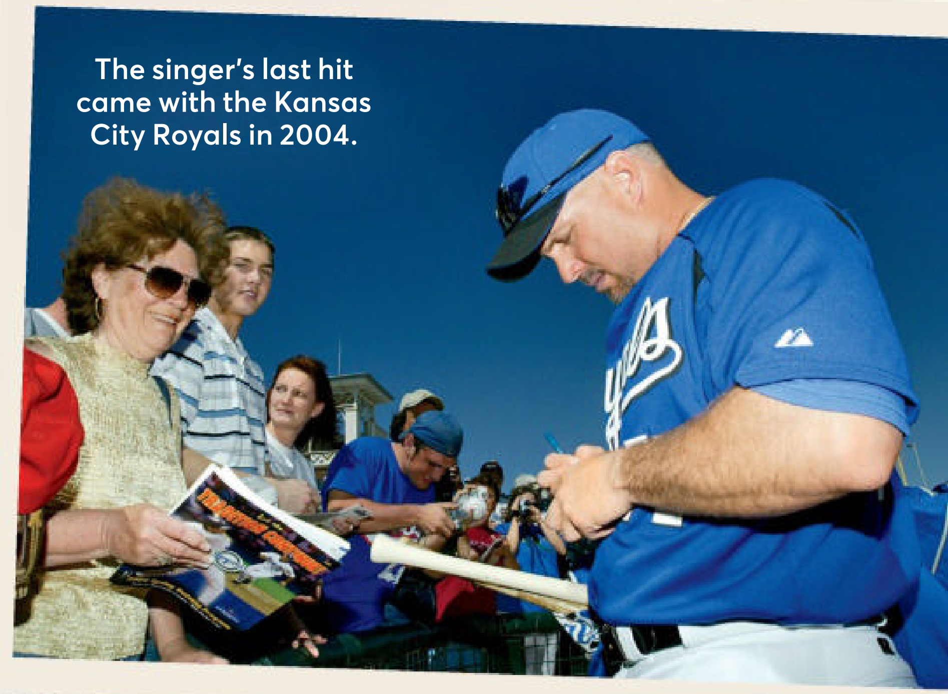
In order to help promote his foundation, Garth took up an offer to participate on-field during the San Diego Padres' spring training, which took place in Peoria, Arizona, in March 1998. Though it was a mostly low-key affair, the singer returned to the following year's spring training, again with the Padres, and had perhaps his greatest moment in the sun as an athlete: He hit an RBI that helped the team seal a win over the Chicago Cubs, his first hit off a major league pitcher after 22 at- bats to that point. "All my six weeks [here], all I wanted to do was contribute," Garth told the Associated Press.

★

"He was an inspiration to our players, the passion he had for the game and the way he went about it."

KEVIN TOWERS, PADRES GENERAL MANAGER

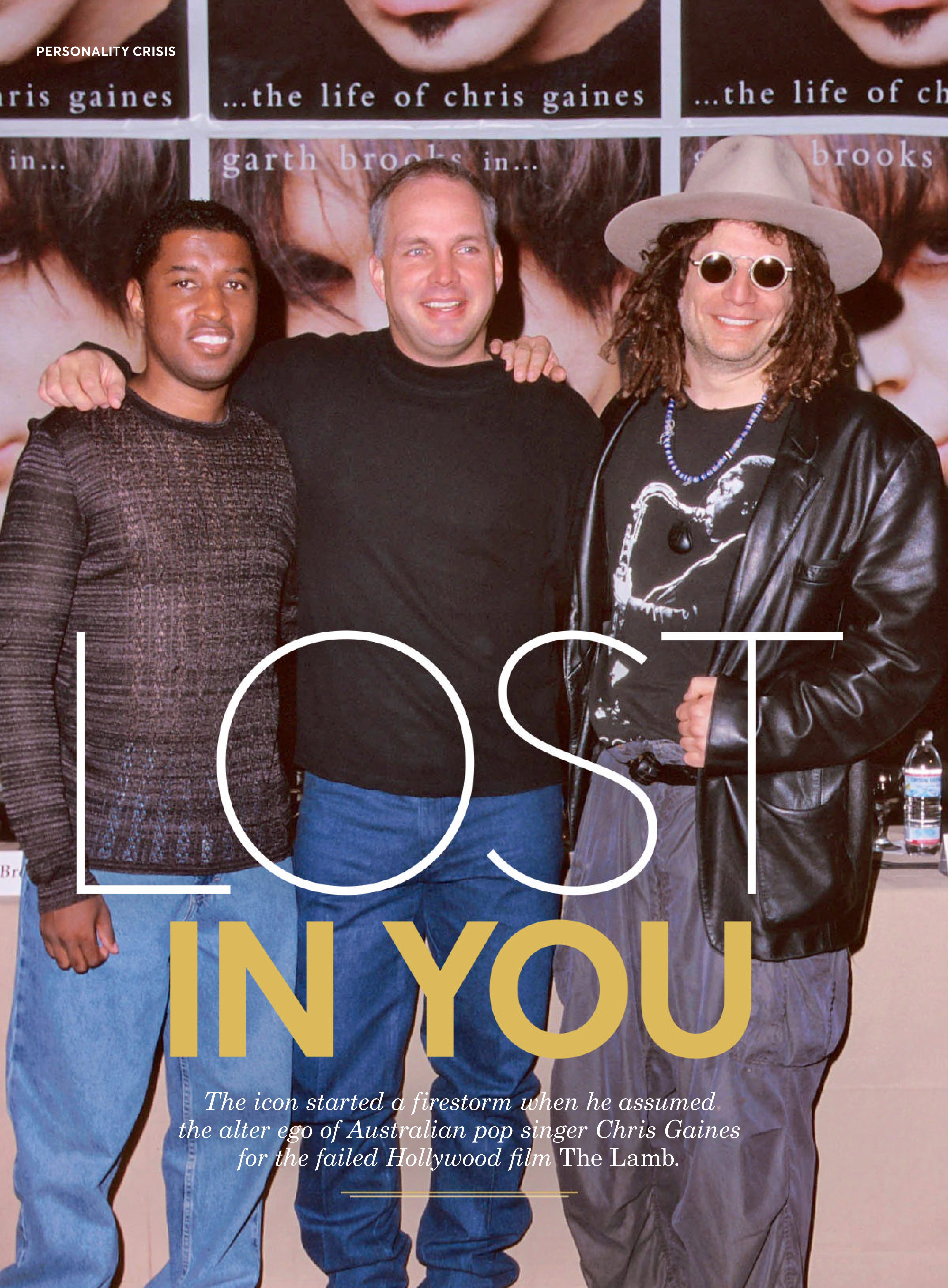
His performances were good enough that the Padres' general manager, Kevin Towers, offered the musician a nonroster position on the team to join them during the first month of the regular season. Towers joked about offering him a four-year, $32 million contract, similar to the team's star pitcher, but Garth told him "he could make that in a weekend." In the end, Towers was impressed, sharing, "He saw this as maybe potentially costing a young prospect or player a spot on the roster, and he didn't want that to happen."


The singer's last hit came with the Kansas City Royals in 2004.

Those appearances helped fuel $1.9 million in donations for Touch 'Em All by the end of 1999, so it was little surprise to see the singer take up a new offer from the New York Mets to take part in their spring training the following year. This appearance proved less fruitful from an on-field perspective, as he went 0-for-17 and drew a single walk.

His subsequent retirement from performing (see page 66) also seemed to signal the end of his playing days, but he would in fact return to the diamond before he did the stage. Come 2004, now at the age of 42, Garth returned to action with the Kansas City Royals. This stint saw him hit a lone single off reliever Mike Meyers of the Seattle Mariners, which raised his career batting average to a still well-below-par .025. Nonetheless, Garth raved about the experience, telling ESPN when asked about his ideal position, "Probably sitting down and eating." Yet he also boasted that more than 400 players had by now committed to his charity, at this point rechristened Teammates for Kids, which had in turn raised $37 million.

That seemed likely to be the end of his fairy-tale run, but there was one last inning left to be played. Fifteen years later, in 2019, the 57-year-old icon laced up his cleats one more time to join the spring training roster of the Pittsburgh Pirates. This was perhaps the biggest dream fulfilled for Garth, who, despite growing up in Oklahoma, was a childhood fan of the Pirates and especially their star player Roberto Clemente, who died in a plane crash in 1972 off the coast of his native Puerto Rico, as he was headed on a relief mission to deliver disaster supplies to Nicaragua. "It's pretty cool that it's full circle all the way around for the guy who started this in my heart," Garth said. All told he went 2-for-42 at the plate.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LOST IN YOU

The icon started a firestorm when he assumed the alter ego of Australian pop singer Chris Gaines for the failed Hollywood film The Lamb.

At left, Garth Brooks and producers Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds and Don Was pose at a press event for *The Lamb* in Hollywood, May 10, 1999. He later fielded questions from reporters (above).

THE HISTORIC SUCCESS OF GARTH BROOKS' second world tour had emphatically restored him to the top of the country music world, not to mention reinforcing his staying power as a pop culture mainstay. Outlets like *Newsweek*, *People* and *Playboy* hailed him, while the Country Music Association made him the first artist ever to win Entertainer of the Year honors four times. He did so with stiff competition from country stars like Shania Twain, Kenny Chesney and the Dixie Chicks, who all did their best to emulate his phenomenal selling power.

Then came the inkling of a new kind of challenge. Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, the noted R&B producer behind such artists as Toni Braxton, Whitney Houston and TLC, had reached out once before with the idea of a film project. Now, the second time around, Garth took the notion more seriously.

Babyface's idea was for a film called *The Lamb*, about the life of a fictional pop singer, Chris Gaines. He wanted Garth to play Gaines, and to also record a "Greatest Hits" album of the character's songs to promote the film. Garth was intrigued: He'd always loved movies, and his experiences creating videos further whetted his appetite for the role. Playing Gaines was an unusual opportunity, too, as he could step outside his country comfort zone to take on a new challenge.

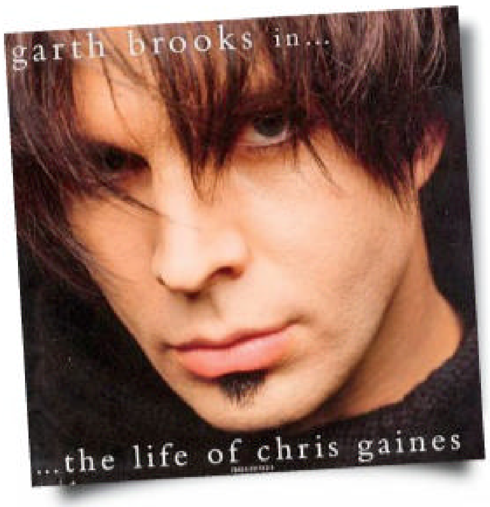
Unusually, Garth decided that he wanted to record Gaines' album ahead of the film to help build an audience and expectation. It was an extraordinarily brave ploy—and one that ultimately backfired terribly.

The music itself made for fascinating listening. Garth dropped his customary twang and raised his voice to a falsetto. He also selected a batch of pop songs designed to show Gaines' supposed artistic evolution over time, like "Lost in You" and "It Don't Matter to the Sun." He worked with pop producer Don Was.

But even before *Garth Brooks in…the Life of Chris Gaines*' release, red flags began to pop up. Early press was marked by decided interest and curiosity over this unusual career change, but it quickly turned to skepticism. Garth appeared in character in his interviews, wearing a wig and makeup, and inevitably the public began conflating his role with a serious change of style. "If this project does not succeed, it will be because we did not get past the stumbling block that it's from Garth Brooks. That's it," he insisted.

A far bigger blow landed in August 1999, the month prior to the album's release: Garth's mother, his guiding light and voice of reason throughout his life, succumbed to throat cancer. Garth was devastated, and would spend much of the coming years attempting to come to terms with life without Colleen Brooks.

When the album followed in September, it initially performed well, debuting at No. 2 on the



★

"I'm just doing a character for a movie, and he happens to be a pop-rock artist who has a catalog."

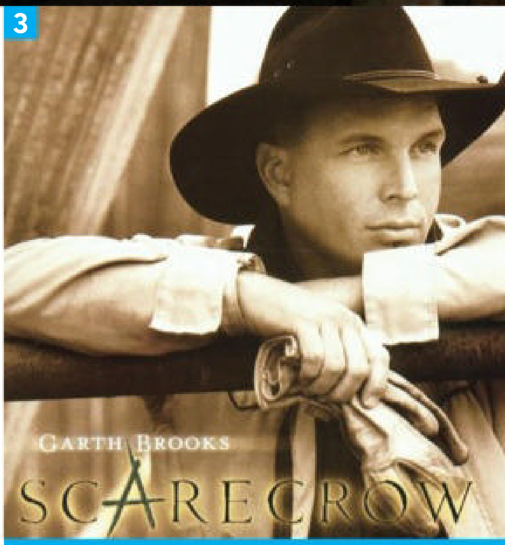
GARTH BROOKS

1

2

COUNTRY WEEKLY
The World's #1 Selling Country Music Magazine
INSIDE: Stars Caught Kissing!
It's Over
Garth Brooks says he's retiring. But do we believe him?
ALSO: Wynonna, The Mavericks, Suzy Bogguss

3



1 Lorianne Crook and Charlie Chase, here at an event in February 2014 in Nashville, Tennessee, were the hosts of TNN's *Crook & Chase*, on which Garth revealed his plans to retire in 1999. **2** Sensationalistic headlines announced the shocking news of the star's planned exit. **3** "In *Oz*, the Scarecrow led with his heart," said Garth, of the inspiration for his album. "But remember, he was brainless. That pretty much sums me up."

Billboard 200 and eventually going twice Platinum. "Lost in You," its lead single, made it to No. 5 on the pop chart. But the criticism came swiftly and fiercely, driven further by a special mockumentary-style episode of VH1's *Behind the Music* about Gaines' life that aired on NBC, plus Garth's second stint hosting *Saturday Night Live*—this time in the character of Gaines. Critics turned against the music as well. Virtually forgotten in the hubbub was Garth's second Christmas album, which was a country No. 1.

Meanwhile, behind-the-scenes production issues put the film on hold. The public, naturally, assumed that it was due to the backlash over Garth. *The Lamb* was never returned to again. "My ribs are still sore from getting the s--- kicked out of me for doing that one," Garth told 102.3 Blake FM in 2015. "But I love that record, and I would do it again in a heartbeat."

At the end of a very rocky year, the entertainer appeared on the TNN talk show *Crook & Chase* in December and dropped a bombshell: He was planning to retire. This wasn't the first time he'd considered leaving the business, nor the first time he'd even discussed it publicly. Ever since his eldest daughter, Taylor, was born in 1992 he speculated on whether he might walk away from performing to focus more on his family. Now, he insisted, he was going to take the plunge. "I never, ever thought in my life I'd say this, but music is not the first thing in my life anymore," he explained.

Onlookers wondered whether the megastar—who accounted at the time for a staggering 10% of global record sales—would really retire. As the new millennium dawned in 2000, however, the singer scaled back his public commitments and focused on his home life, moving his family back to Oklahoma to be closer to his father and his wife Sandy's parents. But his marriage was in terminal decline, and in October 2000, on the eve of a gala Capitol Records was throwing to celebrate its star reaching 100 million in sales, Garth announced that he and Sandy were getting divorced after 14 years of marriage.

Despite the odd guest appearance and various charitable functions, Garth stepped away from touring, but he was still on the hook with Capitol for one more album to fulfill his contract. Thus he returned to working with his longtime producer Allen Reynolds to complete his eighth solo studio album, *Scarecrow*, so named he said because the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz* "led with his heart." Much like *The Chase* nearly a decade prior, the album found Garth in deeply reflective spirits, particularly as he worked through the emotions he was dealing with over the loss of his mother.

Scarecrow proved Garth was by no means whipped, becoming his seventh album to debut at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200—a record for all artists of all time—upon its November 2001 release. It eventually went five-times Platinum. To help promote the album in lieu of touring, he recorded a series of TV concert specials.

Working on *Scarecrow* helped reunite Garth with his longtime singing partner Trisha Yearwood, who was now divorced for the second time. At last, they began to form a closer relationship outside the studio and in March 2002 they went public as a couple. "We had a lot more in common than I ever dreamed we did," he recalled to Ellen DeGeneres in 2013.

As Garth and Trisha's relationship grew in their early years, Garth stayed true to his word and remained officially retired from music. It would be a few years before he returned to the stage, and more than a dozen before he recorded his next album of new material.

MAD ABOUT GARTH

The country star's television cameos went well beyond hosting *Saturday Night Live*.

Garth and host John Goodman salute the crowd on *Saturday Night Live*, March 14, 1992.

The Nov. 2, 1991, episode of *Empty Nest*, "Country Weston," featured Garth as a guest star.

GARTH BROOKS' DESIRE to take a starring role on the silver screen may have ended in disaster but his love affair with the small screen went well beyond his acclaimed run of music videos to including guest spots on some of the hottest television shows of the day.

As soon as Garth began to make it big as a country star, he inevitably got the invite to come on country mainstay variety show *Hee Haw*, which he duly appeared on four times. But that was to be small change compared to the stature he quickly grew to achieve.

Prime-time network TV came calling, although Garth wasn't really asked to do much besides, well, be himself. In 1991, he played none other than Garth Brooks on the golden-year sitcom *Empty Nest*, then reprised the "role" for the younger, hipper sitcom *Mad About You* three years later. He also fit in just right with guest spots on *Sesame Street* and *Muppets Tonight*, on both occasions dropping in to sing some of his songs.

But Garth had a broader range than that, and proved as much when he had his first stint hosting *Saturday Night Live* in 1998 (he'd been musical guest six years earlier). "Their sense of humor is very dark," he told CNN of his foray into the brave new world of live, late-night TV. "They're taking care of me, but I'm not so hip so they're trying to fix that." His return to the show, as well as his appearance on *Behind the Music*, in the guise of Chris Gaines, didn't go over nearly so well.

Once Garth entered early retirement, his acting career paused, too, but he's since returned for cameos on NBC's *The Voice*, where he served as a mentor on season 11 in 2016.

LOVE WILL ALWAYS WIN

The romance between Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood is one of country music's greatest, but it didn't come easy for them.

COUNTRY MUSIC IS KNOWN FOR ITS POWERFUL love songs, and also for its rich history of power couples. From George Jones and Tammy Wynette to Johnny Cash and June Carter to Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, many of its biggest stars have made for legendary pairings when they shared the mic with each other. They didn't even need to be coupled up to make great music, as Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn successfully proved.

Few, however, are as special as Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood. Besides being two of the most likable people in the business, they also really had to earn their happiness together. While they became a trusted team as singing partners early in their careers, they had to wait a long time for their romance to be able to begin.

Trisha, like Garth, came from a middle-class family, with a schoolteacher for a mother and a banker for a father. She was born two and a half years after Garth, on Sept. 19, 1964, in Monticello, Georgia—population 2,000. While Garth busied himself with sports and family singalongs, Trisha played talent shows and sang at church and community events. After high school, she earned an associate degree in business, but after a year at the University of Georgia she dropped out and turned her attention to pursuing a career in music.

Takamine
Dean Markley

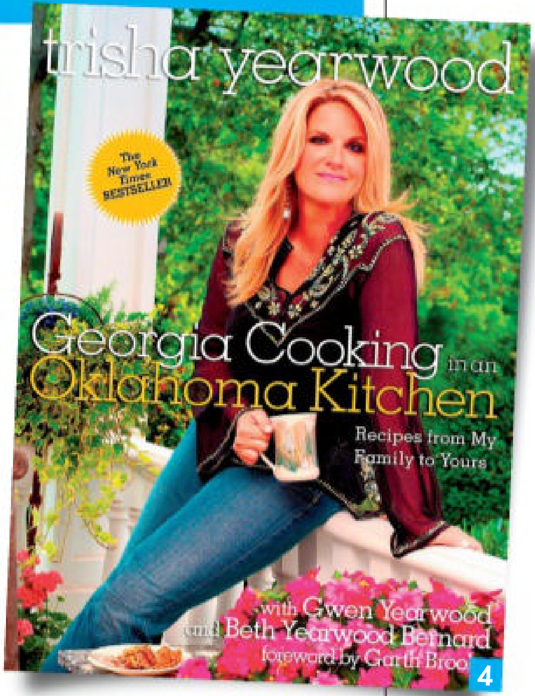
Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood sing at the 2019 MusiCares Person of the Year gala.

1

2

1 Trisha made serious strides toward a singing career long before her future husband did. **2** Gwen Yearwood joins her daughter and son-in-law at the Hollywood Bowl in 2009. She and Trisha co-authored two cookbooks together. **3** "At home in Oklahoma, I'm Mr. Yearwood," notes Garth, who loves to brag about his wife's charms and talents. **4** Trisha had a bestseller with 2008's *Georgia Cooking in an Oklahoma Kitchen*.

3


trisha yearwood
The New York Times BESTSELLER
Georgia Cooking in an Oklahoma Kitchen
Recipes from My Family to Yours
with Gwen Yearwood and Beth Yearwood Bernard
foreword by Garth Broo

4

Heading to Nashville, Tennessee, Trisha enrolled at Belmont University, the academic proving ground for many young country music hopefuls, where she studied music business. While there, she picked up an internship at independent label MTM Records, which was founded by Mary Tyler Moore, working as a receptionist. Through that, the young singer got the chance to record vocal scratch tracks for demos that the label hoped would be picked up by mainstream artists. One of the artists she sang with was Garth. "We hit it off," Trisha told CMT. "But I had no idea he'd turn out to be Garth Brooks!"

A short time after they started recording together, Garth landed his deal with Capitol Records, and he promised to help Trisha out if he ever got the chance. Their voices worked well together, and each was eager to carve out a career for themselves despite the long odds.

But that was all there was to their relationship then: Garth was married to Sandy Mahl, and Trisha, too, was wed to Chris Latham, whom she married in 1987. "It's strange because I had that feeling like when you first meet your wife, but I'd been married for 13 months," Garth told Ellen DeGeneres in 2013. "Being married, it's gotta be right."

When it came time to cut his sophomore album, *No Fences*, Garth brought Trisha in to sing harmonies. Through that, she got a spot at a label showcase and there she finally got her own break: a record deal with MCA Records. She didn't waste any time making the most of it: Her first single, "She's in Love With the Boy," released in March 1991, was a No. 1 country hit. Her debut album, *Trisha Yearwood*, released that August, went to No. 2 and sold more than 2 million copies. Providing backing vocals on the track "Like We Never Had a Broken Heart" was none other than Garth.

As one of the hottest things in country music, Trisha went on tour that summer with Garth, and also signed a deal with Revlon cosmetics to appear in its television ads. In the coming years she stood out with the steady excellence of her recordings, which were praised by critics and sold reliably well in equal measure. *Thinkin' About You*, from 1995, spawned two more No. 1 singles and by that time she was also dabbling in acting, including a recurring role on the hit TV show *JAG*.

By the end of the decade, however, Trisha was twice divorced, her marriage to Latham having ended in 1991 and her second—to The Mavericks' bassist Robert Reynolds—collapsing in 1999 after five years.

All the while, she and Garth went in and out of each other's lives, with duets like "In Another's Eyes" from 1998 going to No. 2. Trisha's decision to join her friend on his world tour that year once again sparked the ongoing rumor that the two were more than just friends, a fact both stridently denied. Garth, in fact, was desperately trying to save his marriage to Sandy, but when that came to an end he and Trisha gave in to the inevitable.

Since making their relationship official in 2002, Trisha devoted herself to being a second mom to Garth's kids while doing her best to respect Sandy's space. She and Garth, though, insist on never spending time apart—"We plan our days if we're gonna be apart, so that we can get back together as soon as possible," she's shared—and in 2005 Garth proposed to her onstage during an event at Buck Owens' Crystal Palace in Bakersfield, California. "I'm freaking out onstage in front of 7,000 people. But I did say yes," Trisha recalled to *Us Weekly*.

While Garth made the most of his retirement, Trisha was at the peak of her powers, earning her first country No. 1 album with 2001's *Inside Out* and repeating the feat with its follow-up, *Jasper County*, four years later. Gradually, though, Trisha turned her attention to other passions. In 2008 she wrote her first cookbook, *Georgia Cooking in an Oklahoma Kitchen*, with her sister and mother. It became a *New York Times* bestseller. In 2010, she wrote a bestselling follow-up. Two years later, she returned to TV on a full-time basis as the host of her own cooking show on the Food Network, *Trisha's Southern Kitchen*, for which she received an Emmy Award in 2013 and continues to helm in its 12th season.

With Garth back on the road, Trisha has taken more of a back seat musically, but has joined him as a regular guest on his comeback world tour. Throughout their years together, they've never hesitated to help lift each other up to new heights. "I think we're just meant to be," Trisha told *Parade*. "We have a friendship that's a great base for all of it." As recently as August 2022, Garth professed his desire to be a "duet couple" on his Inside Studio G Facebook Live series, to which Trisha teased, "To do that, we need to record some more duets." Garth was happy to oblige: "Any chance to sing with you, I will take," he said.

BEST OF THE LOVEBIRDS

The couple shines on these five essential collaborations.

"LIKE WE NEVER HAD A BROKEN HEART" (1991)
Garth Brooks shared in the writing credit for this cut off Trisha Yearwood's self-titled debut. At that point, she was still early enough in her career that his presence could add a big boost to one of her singles, although she'd already topped the charts on her own. "Like We Never Had a Broken Heart" was her second-ever single, and fared pretty well in its own right by reaching No. 4.

"IN ANOTHER'S EYES" (1997)
As surprising as it may sound, Garth and Trisha have never had a No. 1 single together, but they came closest when he contributed his talents to this cut off Trisha's first greatest hits collection, *Songbook*. Once again Garth shared in the writing credits, but it marked their first major collaboration since independently becoming superstars. It reached No. 2 and earned them a Grammy for Best Country Vocal Collaboration, the second and last Grammy win in Garth's illustrious career.

"SQUEEZE ME IN" (2002)
Garth and Trisha were yet to go public with their romance when they released "Squeeze Me In" as the third single from Garth's *Scarecrow* album, but the chemistry was already bubbling to the surface in the studio. Written by Delbert McClinton and originally recorded a few years prior by another artist, these two took it to the country Top 20 and another Grammy nomination.

"LOVE WILL ALWAYS WIN" (2005)
A rare instance of the couple tackling another country star's hit, "Love Will Always Win" was a success in Faith Hill's hands in 1998. Seven years later, Garth—then still officially retired—and Trisha opted to turn it into a duet for *The Lost Sessions*. It was released as a single a few months after the couple were married, and they marked the occasion by singing the song on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

"SHALLOW" (2021)
These two legends certainly aren't afraid to cover the biggest of big hits. "Shallow" became a phenomenon in 2018 thanks to its appearance in Lady Gaga (an avowed fan of Garth's) and Bradley Cooper's remake of *A Star Is Born*. Three years later, Garth and Trisha released this inspired rendition, often performing the power ballad during Garth's live shows, proving that the flame still burns hot between them after all these years.

IN ANOTHER'S EYES
GARTH BROOKS & TRISHA YEARWOOD
SHALLOW

"In Another's Eyes" won them a Grammy, while their cover of "Shallow" won them some new fans.

LEARNING TO LIVE AGAIN

The singer made the most of his newly retired life with his family, but before long there were signs of a comeback.

DESPITE THE WIDESPREAD SPECULATION THAT Garth Brooks would find it hard to be away from the spotlight, the erstwhile singing star settled in nicely to his new life as a full-time father in the early years of the new millennium. "People said, 'How can you walk away from music?'" he later told *People*. "But being a dad—there's nothing that can touch that."

With music in his rearview mirror, Garth devoted his time to his three young daughters, whom he was eager to watch grow up. The girls split their time between Dad and their mother, Sandy, who lived on her own ranch across from Garth's in Oklahoma.

Still, there were the occasional public appearances and lots of extra time to devote to his charitable causes—most notably, Teammates for Kids, the baseball foundation he'd started and for which he moonlighted a few times for different pro baseball teams during spring training (see page 56). "If it wasn't for the hitting and the fielding part, and the running," Garth joked to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, "I'd be good at this game."

Though touring was out of the picture, Garth nonetheless made the odd appearance at awards shows and other special music events. In 2002, he traveled to the American Music Awards in Los Angeles to receive the Award of Merit, which had previously been given to the esteemed likes of Frank Sinatra and Paul McCartney. The following year, he and Trisha Yearwood attended Loretta Lynn's induction ceremony to the Kennedy Center Honors, where they sang "Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man" together.

During this time, however, Garth was distraught over the health of one of his heroes turned close friends, Chris LeDoux. The former rodeo star's singing career had taken off in the early '90s thanks to Garth's plug on "Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old)," but he had fallen ill in 2000 when it was discovered he needed a liver transplant. Garth, typically, offered to donate part of his own liver, but it wasn't a match. LeDoux eventually found a donor, but in 2004 there was more bad news: He had bile duct cancer. In March 2005, he was gone.

Garth hadn't recorded any new music in four years, but when the opportunity to pay tribute to LeDoux appeared he was quick to take it up. "Good Ride

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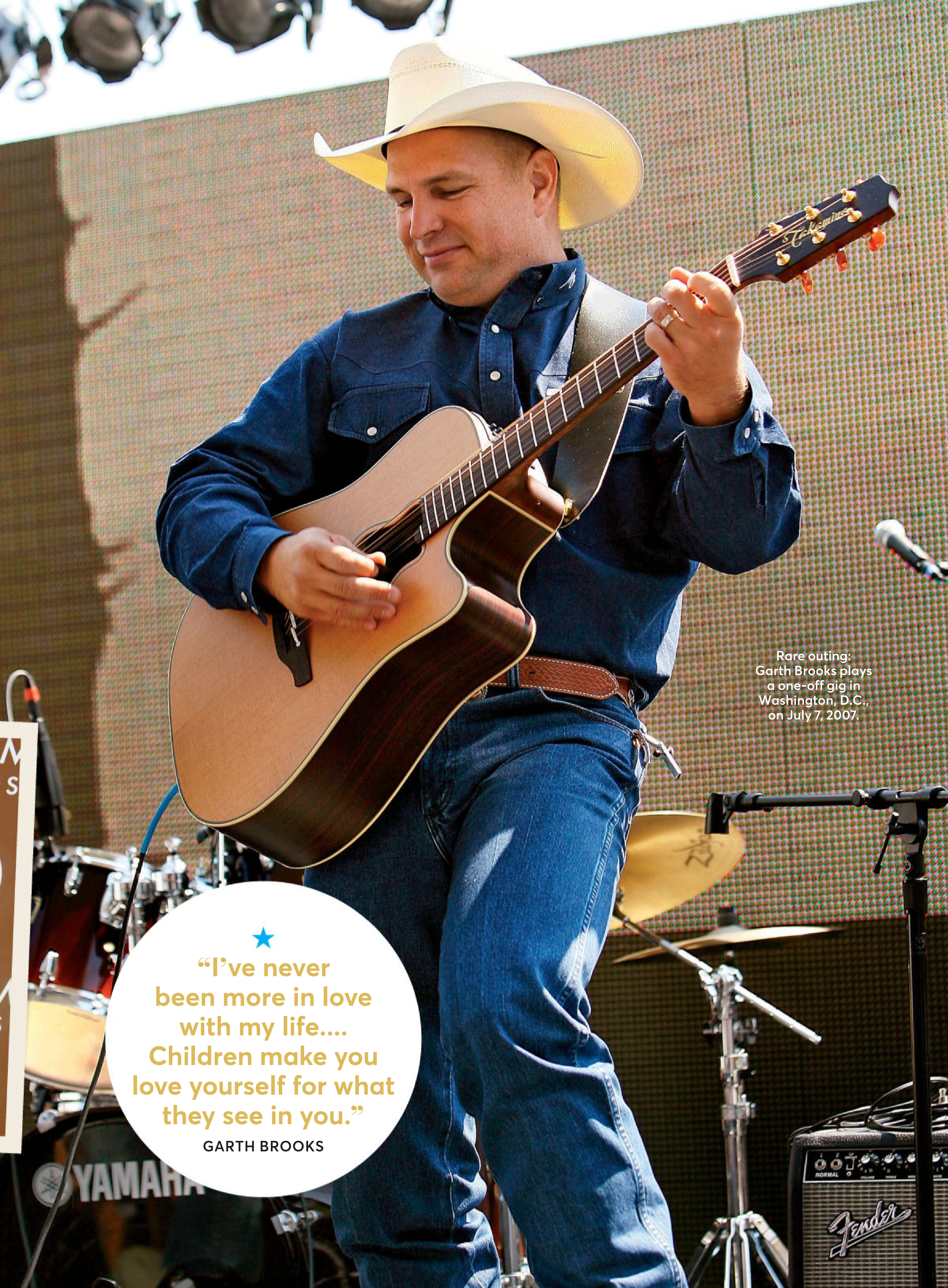
Fresh off exchanging wedding vows, he and Trisha Yearwood arrived at the Grammy Awards in February 2006 and picked up a trophy.



Rare outing: Garth Brooks plays a one-off gig in Washington, D.C., on July 7, 2007.

> ★
>
> **“I’ve never been more in love with my life.... Children make you love yourself for what they see in you.”**
>
> GARTH BROOKS

Cowboy" was penned in his friend's honor. He debuted it that fall at a rare live performance for the Country Music Association Awards in New York City's Times Square. Released as a single that October, "Cowboy" reached No. 3 on the country charts.

The song was to be the first released by Garth under the auspices of his own record label, Pearl Records. Pearl had technically owned all of the singer's music ever since his landmark renegotiation with Capitol Records in 1992, through which Capitol effectively leased his masters. In June 2005, Garth finally terminated his deal with the label after nearly 20 years together.

Having done so, he was approached with a new offer: Walmart, the retail behemoth, proposed being the sole retailer of a new album of Garth's music that had never been released before. It was a potentially sweet deal for the singer, who wouldn't even need to bother with recording new material. (He'd stopped writing altogether since going into retirement.) He agreed, opting to draw the songs from a cache of material that he'd cut between *Sevens* and *Scarecrow*.

So it was that *The Lost Sessions* came to be, an 11-song collection of previously unreleased material that also included "Good Ride Cowboy" and initially premiered in November 2005 as part of a box set reissue of *The Limited Series*, complete with a bonus DVD of interviews. Later released as a stand-alone CD, *The Lost Sessions* has since gone triple Platinum.

FINDING THE SWEET SPOT

Be it in the studio or on the road, the musician's backing bands have been there through thick and thin.

WHEN GARTH BROOKS headed back to the studio in 2005, there was a team of people to help put him back in his comfort zone. There was, for starters, his producer, Allen Reynolds, with whom he'd recorded all the way back to his earliest days at Capitol Records. But there were also the G-Men, his trusted studio players since day one.

He and Reynolds first pulled that team together in 1988, picking the best individual players they could find for each role. There were seven in total: steel pedal guitarist Bruce Bouton, guitarists Mark Casstevens and Chris Leuzinger, bassist Mike Chapman, keyboardist Bobby Wood, fiddler Rob Hajacos and drummer Milton Sledge.

At a holiday party in 1989, Garth promised to stick with them for the rest of his career. He hasn't broken his promise yet: Today, each of those original G-Men—save for Chapman, who passed away in 2016—continue to be his go-to guys for the recording studio.

Of course, most fans wouldn't know the G-Men because, with the exception of Bouton, none of them are part of his touring act, Stillwater. But those players are similarly loyal, and equally well treated by Garth. "The band's contract is that if they leave, I have to kill them," he quipped to *Music City News* in 1990.

Road drummer Mike Palmer has been with the star the longest, dating back to his pre-record-contract days when they had to scrape and scratch together honky-tonk gigs. Bassist Mark Greenwood is another stalwart. Fiddler Jimmy Mattingly is a comparative newcomer, while Dave Gant took up keys in 1992. Others, like guitarist Johnny Garcia and keys man Steve Cox, joined the fray when Garth combined forces with wife Trisha Yearwood's road band.

MUSICIANS HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

In October 2016, the G-Men joined Garth in the Musicians Hall of Fame & Museum.

Accessories
Music
Walmart.com
GARTH BROOKS
GARTH BROOKS
$25.00
6 DISC BOXED SET
$25.00
1

1 As part of his exclusive deal with Walmart, Garth released *The Lost Sessions* solely through the retailer's stores in conjunction with Pearl Records, named for the late country comedian Minnie Pearl. **2** During his retirement, Garth enjoyed popping up for the odd performance, like this June 2005 Walmart corporate meeting. **3** Trisha and Garth indulge in some quality family time with daughter Allie Colleen after she made her Grand Ole Opry debut on Oct. 19, 2017, in Nashville, Tennessee.

Garth ended that year with an even bigger personal accomplishment, as he tied the knot with his longtime girlfriend Trisha Yearwood, whom he married on Dec. 10, 2005. ("It's neat to get to marry your best friend," he beamed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.) The couple christened their new marriage with a Grammy nomination for their duet "Love Will Always Win," which appeared on *The Lost Sessions*.

The following year, Garth returned to the studio to record "More Than a Memory" for a new best-of collection, *The Ultimate Hits*. Released in August 2007, the song was cause for some serious déjà vu: It went to No. 1 on the country chart, Garth's first single to do so in nine years (the last being "To Make You Feel My Love" in 1998), and made history as the first song ever to debut at the top of the country chart.

Two months later, he hit the stage for his biggest concert commitment since his last world tour nearly a decade prior. In the lead-up to the grand opening of the new Sprint Center in Kansas City, Garth was contacted about playing one of the venue's first shows. Already looking for a way to repay Walmart's loyalty with a special performance, and finding that his daughters could easily join him on the private jet to attend the performance, he agreed. Much like old times, demand was so high that a further eight shows were added to the itinerary. All nine sold out in under two hours.

With another set of shows following in January 2008—this time, five sellouts in the span of 48 hours at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, done as relief for recent California wildfires—it was beginning to feel more and more like Garth was coming back. Before long, he would be. But, of course, he'd have to do it on his own terms.

VIVA GARTH VADER

The erstwhile icon edged toward coming out of retirement when he launched his celebrated Las Vegas residency.

WHEN GARTH BROOKS ANNOUNCED HIS REtirement in 2001, he promised that he wouldn't return to performing until at least 2014, when all of his daughters had finished school. But there was always the chance that there would be an offer he couldn't refuse, and finally it came along—aptly enough, from Las Vegas.

On Oct. 15, 2009, Garth held a press conference with Steve Wynn, owner of Wynn Resorts, at the Encore Theater on the Las Vegas Strip to announce a five-year contract for the singer to come out of retirement for a residency at the venue. "I told him he couldn't afford me," Garth recalled. "I was wrong." Though financial details weren't discussed, Wynn acknowledged that Garth would have access to the mogul's private jet, making it easier to maintain his regular family life in Oklahoma with minimal disruption. Shows would be booked around weekends, with tickets held to a flat rate of $125.

Typical of Garth, the residency would defy conventions. Far from the glitz and glam of stereotypical Vegas gigs, and even from his own history of flamboyant productions, the series, billed as Garth at Wynn, focused on stripped-down solo performances with nothing more than the singer and his acoustic guitar. He was occasionally also joined by his wife, Trisha Yearwood, who dueted with him on certain songs.

The residency launched two months later on Dec. 11, kicking off a run of four shows in three nights. Reviewers were full of praise for Garth's low-key approach, which brought a level of intimacy not possible at his stadium concerts of the past while showcasing his engaging demeanor with a knack for onstage banter and easy charisma. "Leave it to Garth Brooks," wrote *Variety*, "to come to Las Vegas with a show that goes against everything Sin City represents."

As the Garth at Wynn shows progressed over the coming years, he worked more and more songs from his favorite artists into the set lists, to the point that the shows consisted almost exclusively of covers. Merle Haggard, George Jones, Simon & Garfunkel, James Taylor, Bob Seger and Billy Joel all featured prominently during his performances.

Inevitably, the format of these sellout shows lent itself to outside promotions. In May 2013, footage was shot for a concert DVD called *Garth Brooks: Live at the Wynn*. Garth returned to the studio with his trusted G-Men to cut recordings of the songs featured in the show. In November of that year, he released the massive six-disc box set *Blame It All on My Roots: Five Decades of Influences*, modeled loosely on the set lists of the Vegas concerts. Four of the discs were covers, with the other two a reis-

The crooner won a big thumbs up in Vegas from Tony Bennett upon his 2015 return to the Wynn, his former residency's home, to sing in a Frank Sinatra tribute for CBS.

sue of his *Ultimate Hits* collection. The *Live at the Wynn* DVD was also included. The collection debuted at No. 3 on the *Billboard* 200, selling 164,000 copies in its first week, and climbed to No. 1 the week after.

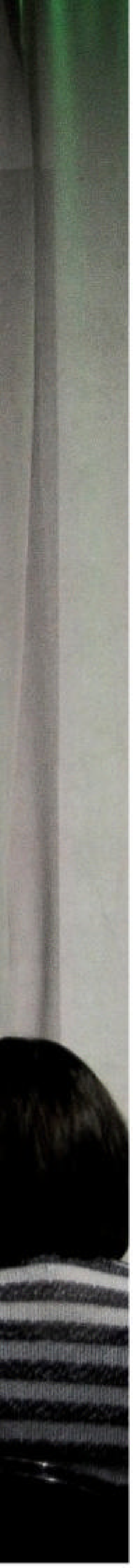
At the end of November, Garth made his final acoustic appearance of the series. That show was again filmed, this time for a live telecast on CBS for a special titled *Garth Brooks: Live From Vegas*. The program was the most-watched in its time slot, pulling in 9.33 million viewers. From there, Garth was set to finish off his final leg of the residency—consisting of four gigs in two nights in January 2014—with a full backing band joining him.

There was even bigger news in store: During an appearance on *Good Morning America* on Dec. 9, 2013, Garth announced that his retirement would at long last be officially over. Come 2014, he and his band would head out on a proper world tour, his first in more than a dozen years. "It sure feels good to get to throw your hat back in the ring," he enthused. But fans would have to wait a while longer to learn the details of what lay ahead.

GHOST TUNES

The artist plugs his online music store and digital library venture at a press conference in September 2014.

GHOST IN THE MACHINE



On the brink of a return to being a full-time artist, the singer made a short-lived bid to beat the major labels with his own online music service.

MAN
GARTH
BROOKS
AGAINST
MACHINE

The arrival of GhostTunes (opposite) coincided with Garth Brooks' comeback album, *Man Against Machine*, in 2014.

FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS OF HIS COUNTRY music stardom, Garth Brooks was never afraid to go to war with the powers that be at the major record labels. Perhaps, as some were wont to accuse him of, there was a bit of a chip on his shoulder over the early rejection he'd received from Music Row in Nashville, Tennessee. But, as with so much else in Garth's life, his battles with the industry were often driven by his undying sense of fairness.

An early victory in contract negotiations in 1992 would not only be a watershed in country music, it laid the groundwork for virtually all of Garth's future business decisions when he later got untangled from his commitment to Capitol Records. Few artists would dream of waving their recording advances, but he was in a position where he could afford to foot the bill. "Even *I* don't know how much money I make," he confided to biographer Bruce Feiler. "I don't have a clue because money's never been that important to me."

A year later, Garth sparked a new controversy when he refused to allow his latest album, *In Pieces*, to be distributed to record stores that sold used CDs. Though it was ultimately a losing battle, the episode signaled that Garth cared deeply about artists and songwriters getting their fair share for the works they created.

More than a decade on, when he finally cut ties with Capitol, he had the chance to look at things once more from a broader view. His subsequent tie-in with Walmart was the first step he'd ever taken to eschew the major labels entirely: That old deal to keep his master recordings under the auspices of Pearl Records wound up putting him in the driver's seat, and he was free to release and repackage his old albums and other recordings however he saw fit. That he was able to drop *The Lost Sessions* at all was testament to the control he had over his own work, even that which had never been released before.

Much had changed in the years that Garth was away from playing and recording music, though. Digital downloads, commonly available in pirated form via sites like Napster, had just begun to carve into the record industry when he retired; at the time, labels were enjoying historic profits at the height of the CD boom. Though labels responded by taking listeners to court and trying to snuff out Napster, the barn door had been opened.

In 2003, the game changed for good when Apple launched the iTunes Store, a digital music library where fans could purchase near limitless music for the low price of $0.99 a song. The decline of physical music was, irrevocably, underway.

By the time Garth geared up for his big return from retirement in 2014, the digital landscape had further evolved to favor music streaming, with digital streaming platforms (DSPs), like Spotify, beginning to take over. Deals like the cozy arrangement with Walmart just wouldn't do enough in this environment, so Garth made a characteristically bold decision: He wanted his own digital music service.

On the eve of Garth's comeback world tour and release of *Man Against Machine*, he announced the creation of GhostTunes in September 2014. The service

Rapper Jay-Z (second from left of TV) was joined by Kanye West, Jason Aldean, Jack White and several other artists (including wife Beyoncé) when he helped launch Tidal at an event in 2015, shortly after GhostTunes' start.

amazon music

Garth and Aldean perform at an Amazon Music event in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2018. GhostTunes was eventually folded into Amazon's digital music subscription service and it's the only platform where fans can access Garth's catalog.

would be the exclusive digital home of Garth's entire musical catalog, available to purchase either as individual songs or entire albums, but with no option for streaming. "We don't want the corporations wagging the tail of the dog," he said.

> "This is a site that treats music with the utmost respect [and offers] music the way artists want to share it."
>
> GARTH BROOKS, ON GHOSTTUNES

Initially, GhostTunes was set up to house Garth's work, but his hope was to bring others into the fold while "remain[ing] small." Several major labels agreed to sign on, with the goal being that they could set their own baseline prices with an eye toward providing more equitable royalty payments to the creators. Garth had been vocal in his criticism of the DSPs, who notoriously gave out pittances for song royalties. "If one of the majors decides to take up [our] strategy and GhostTunes goes out of business, then music wins," he told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Making such a daring model work would be rough, but the entertainer was more than game to try. And he wasn't alone. A little more than a month later, rapper Jay-Z—that genre's first billionaire—was one of the partners behind the launch of the similarly artist-forward streaming service TIDAL.

A bold gambit it may have been, but it wasn't destined to succeed. As early as 2016, Garth seemed to hedge his bets when he helped launch Amazon Unlimited, a streaming service for the online shopping powerhouse. It was an omen of what was to come for GhostTunes: Struggling to get a foothold in the market, and with little exclusive content besides its founder's, the service was finally folded into Amazon's as of March 2017.

More than five years on from GhostTunes' demise, Garth remains as defiant as ever. Amazon is the only digital platform that houses or streams his catalog, as he continues to refuse to cave to the popularity of Spotify or Apple, which has since incorporated iTunes into its Apple Music branding. "It's totally backward right now," he told *Access Hollywood*. "If the artists would just keep hammering away—unify, stick together—then music will become the king again, which is what it should be. Music should always be first."

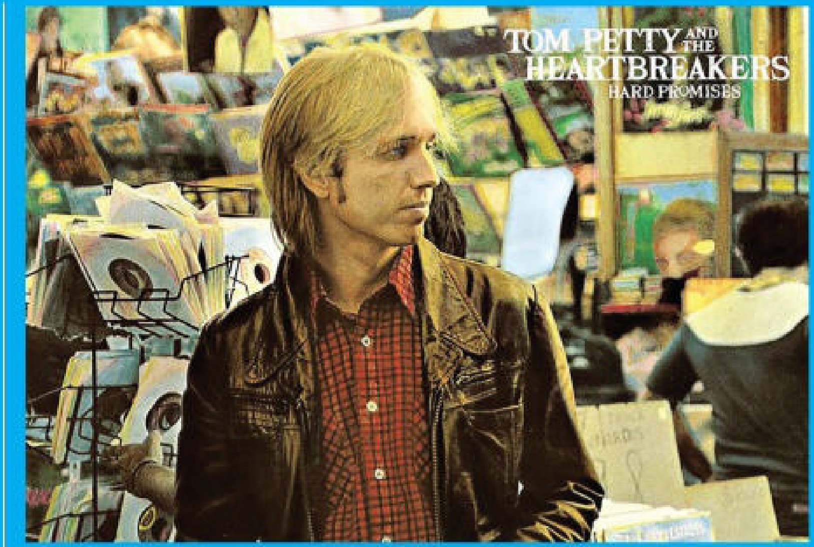
SHINE ON, YOU CRAZY DIAMONDS

Stars opening fire on their record labels is nothing new in the music business.

THE RECORD INDUSTRY has fueled countless superstars' careers over the course of the last century or so. Yet for nearly as long as it's been around, those same artists have regularly rebelled against the system.

Labels were long notorious for exploiting their talent, forcing inexperienced artists into contracts that squeezed them for much of their future profits or saddled them, unwittingly, with debt. Even The Beatles, the bestselling act of all time, felt the pinch, and in the late '60s attempted to break away by forming their own business with Apple Records (not to be confused, of course, with a different Apple of later years).

Going independent wasn't the only way to rebel—in fact, it often wasn't an option. In the 1970s, Pink Floyd released a series of concept albums that famously took aim at the record business. *The Dark Side of the Moon*, at one point the bestselling album of all time, was obsessed with greed and the power hungry; its follow-up, *Wish You Were Here*, was a concept-album takedown of the record industry and its sleazy execs. *The Wall* expanded the idea further over a double-LP.

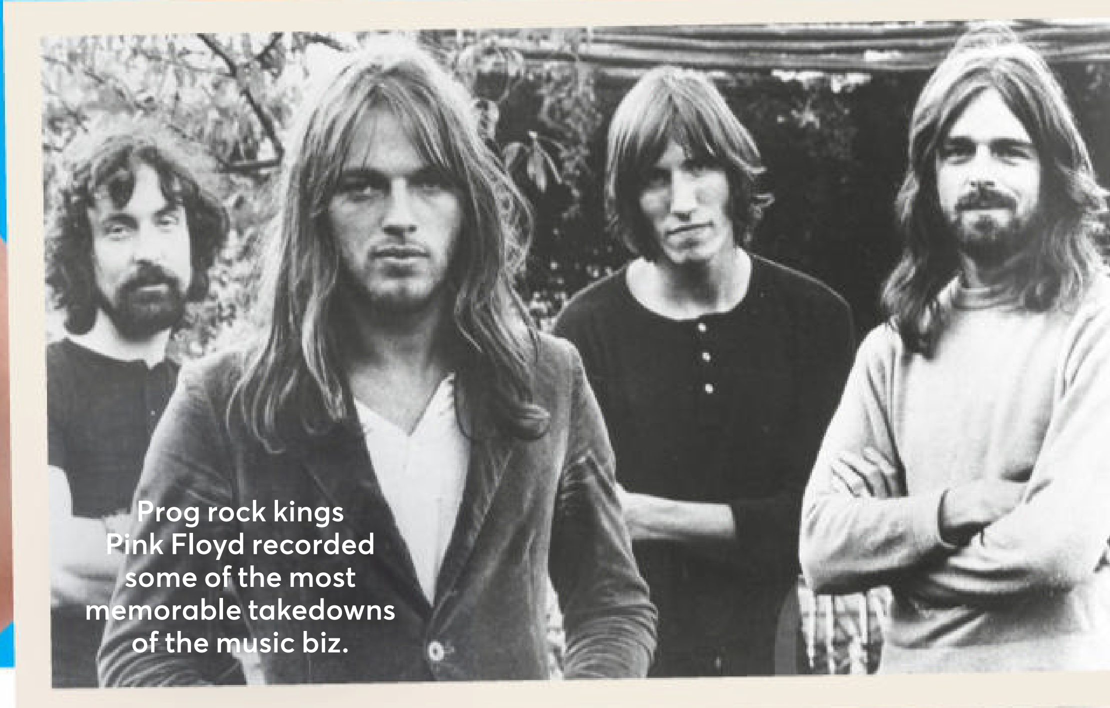

TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS
HARD PROMISES

The late classic rock legend Tom Petty butted heads with his label, MCA Records, over *Hard Promises*.

Yet another classic rocker, Tom Petty, waged his own wars with the bigwigs, first when he refused a sticker price increase on his 1981 album *Hard Promises* and then, nearly 20 years later, when he cut his own concept album, *The Last DJ*.

More recently, Garth Brooks wasn't the only country star—or, at least, onetime country star—to hold out against the streaming titans. Taylor Swift, once the darling of Nashville, Tennessee, before relaunching as a pop idol, was also a longtime holdout from allowing her music onto Spotify. "Trust me. Songwriters are hurting," Garth told *Access Hollywood Live*. "I applaud Miss Taylor and I applaud everyone for standing up for the songwriters, because without them music is nothing."

Taylor Swift removed her music catalog from Spotify in 2014 and didn't allow it back on for another three years.



Prog rock kings Pink Floyd recorded some of the most memorable takedowns of the music biz.

The Garth Brooks World Tour charted new sales territory, even for the singer, on its run from 2014 to 2017, earning $364 million.

WORKING FOR A LIVING

After more than a decade out of the saddle, the performer returned to the world stage and set about smashing tour records all over again.

The singer appears on *Today* with Tamron Hall, Natalie Morales and Al Roker in January 2015.

THE SUCCESS OF THE FOUR-YEAR GARTH AT THE Wynn residency had proved beyond a doubt that Garth Brooks had lost none of his demand among his fans during his extended early retirement. Life was pretty good for the middle-aged star as he reached his 52nd birthday in February 2014, and the future was only looking brighter.

In fact, his family was busy growing: In July 2013, he'd become a grandfather for the first time when daughter August, the middle of his three children, gave birth to baby Karalynn. Garth was over the moon. “She's the little stem that kind of holds the whole family together, and it's kind of new for us,” he told Kicks 105.5 FM. “She's a doll.” He was similarly effusive about his daughter's parenting skills. “No offense to my mom, or Ms. Yearwood's mom, or Sandy's mom. I'm not sure any of them could hold a candle to my daughter.” Three years later, August added a second child to the family.

GARTH BROOKS & TRISHA YEARWOOD
CHRISTMAS
Together

1 Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood duet at Playin' Possum! The Final No Show Tribute to George Jones at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville, Tennessee, on Nov. 22, 2013.
2 The couple dropped *Christmas Together*, a joint holiday album, their first as husband and wife, in the midst of Garth's world tour.

When Garth originally retired, he'd vowed to stay so until all three of the girls were out of the house. With his Las Vegas residency now wrapped, that had finally come to pass. The chips were down and it was time to make his next play.

And so he did: On July 10, 2014, the star held a press conference in which he announced several big pieces of news. He was working on a new album, yet to be named, that would drop later in the year. He did it through a new distribution deal with Sony Music. And, at long last, he had details about the brand-new world tour, his first since the record-smashing trek that ended in 1998. “Words cannot express how excited I am to get to make new music and tour again,” he said.

As became custom back in his '90s heyday, Garth announced shows on an individual basis. The first would be Sept. 4 at Allstate Arena in Chicago. In the coming days, he added 10 more shows at the venue, and continued in this manner throughout, dropping new locations every few weeks. And, true to form, he had no trouble selling out each and every date, no matter how many gigs he played in the same city. The Chicago stops sold 180,000 tickets in under three hours. In Atlanta, LiveNation's ticketing system crashed from the overloading traffic.

The day before the tour opener, Garth had more news, this time in the shape of new music. “People Loving

★

> “The truth is, you can't train for this. You can prepare all you want, but it's a different kind of shape [to tour].”
>
> GARTH BROOKS

An embarrassment of riches: Garth's return to touring netted him five Entertainer of the Year awards in as many years, including the Country Music Association's in 2017.

Come on feel the joy: Garth and his fiddler, Jimmy Mattingly, perform onstage for the world tour kickoff at Allstate Arena in Chicago on Sept. 4, 2014.

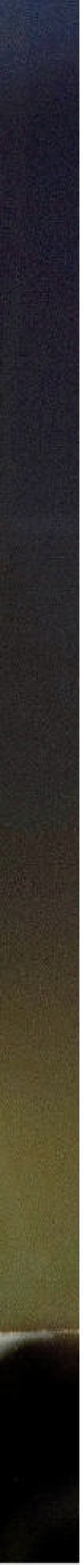
People," a spiritual descendent of "We Shall Be Free" with another message of unity and tolerance, was the lead single for and first taste of his upcoming album. But it wasn't quite the halcyon days here anymore: The new track languished at No. 25, a sign that, while his concerts were as in-demand as ever, times had moved on without him as far as song sales were concerned.

Two months later, *Man Against Machine* was released, marking his first studio album of new material since *Scarecrow* 13 years prior. In the days leading up to its release, he appeared on *Good Morning America* to perform his poignant new cut, "Mom." Garth was adamant this time around that he didn't care about sales or chart performances, which was just as well: Critical response was tepid to negative, and while the album debuted at No. 1 on the country chart and peaked at No. 4 on the *Billboard* 200, sales were anemic, totaling a meager 140,000 in its first week. Times, indeed, had changed for the record industry.

But the tour went on unabated. Garth continued to break records on the road, many of them ones that he'd set himself. In Minneapolis, he sold 201,000 tickets, the most in history for a single tour stop. While there, he set a mark for the most shows performed in one day, which was a mind-boggling 11. Clearly age and all those years away had done nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for putting on the best damn show possible.

In total, the tour stretched to eight separate legs and 390 concerts, another record for a single tour, before it finally wrapped up in December 2017. The tour raked in $364.3 million, surpassing Tim McGraw and Faith Hill's Soul2Soul Tour as the highest-grossing ever by a country artist.

Country music's greatest showman was back, and the establishment couldn't overlook that fact. For three years running, from 2015 to 2017, the Country Music Association named him its Entertainer of the Year. The Academy of Country Music did the same in 2016,



marking the 10th time he'd claimed the award. No one else in the business even comes close to those figures.

In the midst of his many tour commitments, Garth found time to record his next two albums. In November 2016, two weeks apart from each other, he dropped *Christmas Together*, a holiday duets collection with wife Trisha Yearwood, and *Gunslinger*, the solo studio follow-up to *Man Against Machine*. If its predecessor had been his most disappointing to date commercially, *Gunslinger* performed even worse: It failed to crack 20,000 units sold in its first week and peaked at No. 4 on the country chart, the first time he'd failed to top that chart since his self-titled debut in 1989.

New music, at this point, was icing on the cake for Garth and his fans. His comeback world tour had barely come to an end when plans were announced in the spring of 2018 for a brand-new North American stadium tour, which would do away with the arenas of the last go-round in favor of even larger football stadiums. Commitments were more relaxed this time, without the need to book date after date to appease demand, and fans were encouraged to dress up in their favorite team's colors. "I can't think how to make music more fun than to add sports," he told the media.

The stadium jaunt duly kicked off in March 2019, but Garth found time to squeeze in a secondary tour, the novelty Dive Bar Tour concocted to help promote his latest single, "Dive Bar," a duet with fellow superstar Blake Shelton. Far removed from the crowds of tens of thousands of people, Garth set up a limited run of gigs at classic honky-tonks like Buck Owens' Crystal Palace in Bakersfield, California, or Gruene Hall in New Braunfels, Texas. Tickets were awarded exclusively through contests conducted by country radio stations.

The latest shows continued the praise for his tireless enthusiasm as an entertainer, and in 2019 the CMAs rewarded him with a fourth Entertainer of the Year trophy in five years. Not everyone in the industry was pleased with this (see sidebar), and Garth, with a touch of embarrassment, responded by withdrawing himself from consideration the following year.

But by the time the 2020 awards rolled around the world had fallen into a global health crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. Garth's tour—along with virtually every other normal activity—came to a screeching halt. With the world in lockdown and medical services pushed to the brink, Garth did what he's come to be expected to do: He and Trisha set up an online concert for fans to be streamed on Facebook Live, only for the stream to crash after more than 5 million people tried to tune in. As a result, the couple set up *Garth and Trisha Live!*, which aired on CBS and raised $1 million toward pandemic relief efforts. "We're seeing how big things can be when we all do them as one," he said in a statement.

READ MY LIP SYNC

Garth Brooks' prerecorded awards show gaffe opened the door to a spat with fellow country singer Eric Church.

GARTH BROOKS' return to touring was pure manna for his millions of fans around the world, and his global trek made for a predictable box-office smash for country music. But with the old-timer hogging all the attention at the industry awards shows, there was bound to be some backlash from his fellow artists.

They got a chance to criticize him after the Country Music Association Awards in Nashville, Tennessee, in October 2017. While there to collect his third straight Entertainer of the Year prize, Garth performed his most recent single, "Ask Me How I Know." Except, he only sort of performed it: In the days following the ceremony, he admitted that he'd lip-synced. The reason, he claimed, was that he'd lost his voice due to his intense tour itinerary, having played 12 shows in the preceding 10 days.

Not everyone was impressed, and one of those parties was fellow country superstar Eric Church, who was nominated for EOTY but lost out to Garth. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Church didn't mince his words. "I didn't like his excuse at all," Church said, insisting that lip-syncing "is and always will be a red line. It's fabricated. I don't want young artists thinking it's OK, because it's not." Others, like fellow Oklahoman Reba McEntire, defended Garth. "He will not let his fans down. I kinda applaud him," she said. "If he did need to lip-sync, he showed up!"

The Garth-Church feud continued, though. Two years later, Garth again came away with EOTY, again at Church's expense. Later, while out on tour, Church poked fun at his rival, covering Waylon Jennings' classic "Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way" and changing the lyrics to, "And I know Garth didn't do it this way."

Everything did wind up alright in the end: When Garth subsequently bowed out for consideration in 2020, it was none other than Church who came away victorious.

After opening fire on Garth over his lip-sync faux pas, Eric Church duly inherited his mantle.

A VOICE FOR CHANGE

Outside of his music, the singer has committed himself to an array of charitable and social causes, from Habitat for Humanity to LGBTQ rights.

IN NOVEMBER 2011, WITH A BIT OF A BREAK IN the schedule of his Las Vegas residency, Garth Brooks and his wife Trisha Yearwood decided to leave the country. But this was no mere vacation: The singer traded in his guitar and cowboy hat for a hammer and hard hat to go get his hands dirty and do some hard work building houses for Habitat for Humanity down in Haiti, which had been devastated the year prior with a 7.0 earthquake.

This wasn't the type of glitzy getaway that would seemingly befit such a powerful celebrity couple, but for Garth and Trisha it felt like home. The pair first got involved with Habitat for Humanity in 2007 when they traveled to New Orleans to help with recovery efforts from Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the Gulf Coast two years prior. "They're building love, man. And it's the greatest feeling in the world," Garth said of supporting the cause, through which he and Trisha formed a close bond with two of the organization's most dedicated volunteers, former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, former first lady Rosalynn Carter.

Garth felt that getting down in the trenches was vital, and admitted that he hadn't fully understood the scope of the work that the Carters did until he saw it firsthand and realized how much infrastructure work was needed to help natural disaster sites to rebound. "They're just those people you have to just be around to actually believe it," he marveled. He even took pride in seeing Trisha carrying the heavy equipment. "They call her the nail gun diva," Garth bragged.

The work these two did for Habitat for Humanity extended well beyond the photo ops at highly publicized disaster sites. By October 2022, they were even gearing up to take the reins from the Carters as the former first couple prepared to retire, announcing plans to serve as honorary hosts of the 2023 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project. "We are

Garth Brooks helps former President Jimmy Carter on a Habitat for Humanity build. "He has no limit to his work ethic," the singer has said of his friend.

Garth and his wife, Trisha Yearwood, play the Oklahoma Twister Relief Concert organized by Toby Keith in Garth's home state on July 6, 2013.

grateful that our dear friends Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood have picked up the hammer and agreed to host the event in our place," said the former president.

Raised with a firm sense of right and wrong and deeply held convictions to walk the walk about his beliefs, Garth's long been one of country's most compassionate voices of reason. At times that's brought him in for criticism, particularly in the mid-'90s when he lobbied for one-on-one time in the Oval Office to discuss his idea for World Flag Day. "I want to make 1996 the Year of Peace," he told *TV Guide*, promising to "try to reach the world's leaders to encourage them to establish peace on Earth."

But Garth's actions typically spoke for themselves, and in the country world in particular he's tended to be

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1 The country star poses with singer Melissa Etheridge and actor Laura Dern during rehearsals for the Equality Rocks Concert at RFK Stadium in April 2000. **2** That event was highlighted by Garth's duet with British pop star George Michael (left). **3** Garth visits the Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth, Texas, with his Teammates for Kids foundation and the NHL in 2007.

ahead of the conservative norm. Witness his advocacy for gay rights on the 1992 single "We Shall Be Free," which was blacklisted by country radio. Garth credited his half-sister, Betsy Smittle, for opening his eyes to the cause, and he's stuck by those convictions ever since. When asked about gay rights in an interview with *George* magazine in 1999, the singer reiterated his stance, saying, "If you're in love, you've got to follow your heart and trust that God will explain to us why sometimes we fall in love with people of the same sex."

In April 2000, with retirement already beckoning, he traveled to Washington, D.C., to sing a duet with openly gay pop star George Michael during the Equality Rocks concert at RFK Stadium, part of the larger festivities surrounding the Millennium March on the Capitol. The two sang Michael's "Freedom" together. The LGBTQ community praised Garth for his support, with the *Washington Blade* writing, "He's straight, hugely famous, and asks his hordes of country fans to love one another and let everyone else love who they choose."

Garth's retirement years gave him more time than ever to pursue his charitable causes. Teammates for Kids was the highest profile, thanks to his cameos during major league baseball's spring training, but the organization expanded its reach to include other sports like hockey and football.

Before connecting with Habitat for Humanity, Garth and Trisha got involved in Hurricane Katrina aid when they sang a cover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Who'll Stop the Rain" for the *Shelter From the Storm: A Concert for the Gulf Coast* fundraiser. It aired live on all the major TV networks in September 2005 and raised an estimated $30 million in aid for the Red Cross.

That proved only the beginning of Garth's charitable concerts as he began his gradual return to public life. His January 2008 concerts at the Staples Center in Los Angeles were a record-setting effort: The approximately 85,000 tickets, priced at only $40 apiece, for the five-show, two-night stand sold out in just under an hour. CBS broadcast the second of the shows in a live simulcast called *Garth Brooks: Live in LA*, and the entirety of ticket sales were donated to relief of the recent California wildfires.

Two years later, when flooding hit the Nashville, Tennessee, area, Garth rallied with another marathon run of shows at Bridgestone Arena, where he played nine times in a week and raised $5 million from the 140,000 tickets that were sold. Another disaster hit close to home in 2013 with the Oklahoma tornadoes, for which Garth lent his services to Toby Keith's special concert at the University of Oklahoma football stadium in Norman. "It is an honor to be a part of this healing process," Garth said, with a typical mix of awe and humbleness.

SHE'S A RAINBOW

Older half-sister Betsy Smittle was a guiding force in the musician's life, much like their mother, Colleen.

IF GARTH BROOKS looked up to his mother, Colleen, as his guiding light, then older half-sister Betsy Smittle was the next closest thing he had in his life to a personal inspiration. Appropriately so, as she was the first member of the Brooks family to follow in Colleen's musical footsteps.

Nearly 10 years her illustrious baby brother's senior, Betsy dropped out of college after one semester, deciding that she wanted to pursue a career in music. Garth affectionately referred to her as "Hollywood," for her flamboyant persona and style of dress. She eventually joined Garth's backing band, Stillwater, as a bassist in 1992, handling those duties on tour and each of his major albums during the period.

Two years later, already in her early 40s, Betsy finally released her first album, *Rough Around the Edges*. She appeared at the 1994 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City to sing the album's lead single, "Doesn't Take Much." Though she reportedly went into semi-retirement in 1999, the year that Colleen passed away, she released another album in 2001, *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can*.

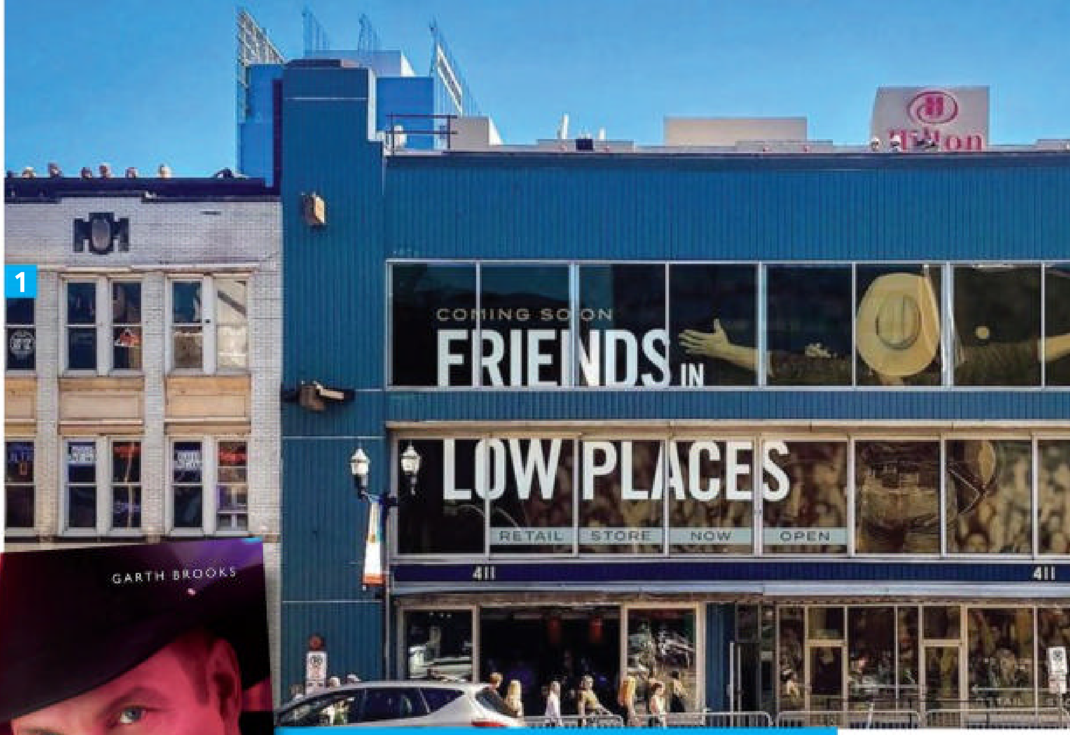
Though Betsy's sexuality was touted as a key inspiration to Garth's embracing of gay rights and the writing of "We Shall Be Free," the star made the major mistake of accidentally outing his sister in a 1993 television interview with Barbara Walters. At the time, Betsy shrugged off the slipup, saying it was no secret that she was gay, but years later admitted to *The Oklahoman*, "Garth really should have asked me before outing me at the time."

The musician eventually settled down in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she frequently performed at local gay pride parades, but she also battled with mental illness. In 2009, after she was arrested for running out of her house naked, she spent two weeks in a psychiatric clinic. She died in 2013 at the age of 60, reportedly after a battle with cancer.

AMAZING GARTH

Garth Brooks takes part in the inauguration of President Joe Biden at the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 20, 2021. While there to perform "Amazing Grace" (main), he had the opportunity to personally congratulate the new leader of the free world (above).

At the age of 60, the star continues to earn his lifetime honors and achievements—but that hasn't slowed his desire to entertain and bring people together.



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GARTH BROOKS
FUN
LIMITED EDITION

1 “It’s a classic honky-tonk.... It’s what I grew up in,” Garth says of his bar that’s set to open in downtown Nashville. **2** *Fun* marked his third studio album since returning from semi-retirement, but it was his least successful commercially. **3** The icon receives the Gershwin Prize from members of Congress, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, in March 2020. **4** Garth at his Kennedy Center Honors ceremony in May 2021. “Music is what starts my day,” he told CBS News beforehand.

WHEN PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN WAS INAUGUrated on Jan. 20, 2021, Garth Brooks stood on the same platform as the new leader of the free world in front of the U.S. Capitol. This wasn’t the first time that Garth had gotten to appear on this stage: Twelve years prior, he’d sung at Barack Obama’s inauguration, when Biden was first sworn in as vice president. But this time felt different.

The past year had seen the world caught in the death grip of COVID-19, Garth himself having to call off his stadium tour in February 2020. What followed had left deep scars on the global community, especially in the U.S., where 1 million people and counting have died from the virus. Biden’s own winning campaign had come through one of the ugliest elections in American history.

But this was the type of moment that Garth lived for. In the lead-up to his performance in Washington, D.C., he spoke about the gravity of the occasion. “This is not a political statement, this is a statement of unity,” he told reporters, adding on a subsequent visit to *Good Morning America*: “I might be the only Republican at this place, but it’s about reaching across the aisle and loving one another.” That day in the cold winter air, he sang a moving rendition of “Amazing Grace.”

Garth had scaled nearly every summit he could have imagined. He could be forgiven for coasting—and yet, he’d persisted. A few months prior to the inauguration, in November 2020, he dropped his 11th solo studio album, *Fun*, an album that had a long, difficult gestation. Initially announced in 2018, he’d released its first three singles before the pandemic and various production delays intervened. By his own lofty standards, it was a modest effort, peaking at No. 7 on the country chart—the worst any of his albums has performed—and, for the first time in his career, he failed to reach the pop Top 40. Simply creating new music, however, seemed to be all the salve he needed. There were new box sets, as well, including a third, six-CD installment of the *Anthology* career retrospective series, released in November 2022.

Despite his enforced absence from touring, Garth was in the midst of a banner period. It began in the winter of 2020, right before the world shut down, when it was announced that he’d receive the Gershwin Prize for Recorded Music from the Library of Congress. It was an honor reserved for those who’ve made the most distinguished contributions to the artistic form.

Then, in May 2021, he was among the recipients of the 43rd annual Kennedy Center Honors, alongside actors Dick Van Dyke and Debbie Allen, singer

Joan Baez and violinist Midori. Besides witnessing Kelly Clarkson sing “The Dance,” Garth was brought to tears by seeing his hero, James Taylor, perform his song “The River.” Garth had played at Taylor’s own Kennedy Center induction five years prior. Wife Trisha Yearwood gave a heartfelt speech. “I learned how to be an artist. I learned how to be a person. I learned how to just really be from this guy,” she said. “He led by example.”

There’s no shortage of ways to try to measure Garth’s achievements. His 2012 induction to the Country Music Hall of Fame was all but a formality, a question of when and not if. He’s also a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Musicians Hall of Fame and Museum.

In 2017, he became the only artist in history with seven certified Diamond albums by the Recording Industry Association of America, the authority on U.S. record sales. He’d previously been tied with The Beatles. Garth has also gone back and forth with Elvis Presley as the bestselling American artist of all time, an honor they’ve traded since Garth was initially named the top domestic artist of the 20th century. (Subsequent re-tabulations saw the top spot switched numerous times since.)

Yet Garth’s enormous sales totals, both for recorded music and concert tickets, could never sum up the entirety of his legacy. No one else has done anywhere near as much to make country a mainstream phenomenon and no one has matched his sustained staying power. He’s even chosen to branch out into the role of club owner, with the April 2022 announcement of a new concert venue in the heart of downtown Nashville called Friends in Low Places Bar & Honky Tonk. He later shared plans to incorporate a police substation inside the three-story, 40,000-square-foot building to help increase safety along the popular Broadway main drag.

Garth, who’s now 60, is nowhere near slowing down. Since returning to touring in July 2021, he continues to raise the bar for himself: At a Lincoln, Nebraska, show the following month, he set a personal record for single-concert ticket sales with 90,000. And in September 2022, he received the Kris Kristofferson Lifetime Achievement Award at the 5th Annual Nashville Songwriter Awards. Kristofferson himself congratulated the artist by telling him, via a statement, “You belong on Mount Rushmore.”

For now, though, the artist is just resetting his sights on Las Vegas: On Nov. 14, he announced a new Garth Brooks/Plus ONE residency to start in May 2023 at Caesars Palace. “Vegas is the place where anything goes,” he said in a statement. “The perfect combination to present a show that will not only push the envelope, it’s gonna shred it.” The Plus ONE theme will feature him alone on stage, but he’ll call band members up individually or in groups to join him, as needed. Special guests could play into the unique theme, too. As he teased on *Good Morning America* about Trisha’s involvement, “I’m hoping she’s gonna make some trips with us.” Fans should like those odds.

The Beatles (clockwise from top left): John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr

COME TOGETHER

Here’s where the country music legend ranks amongst the bestselling musicians in history.

GARTH BROOKS MAY insist that he’s not concerned with record sales, but that doesn’t stop everyone else from wanting to compare him with the greats. After all, when it comes to all-time sales records, he’s in extremely rarefied air.

When looking at just raw sales, Garth’s numbers are staggering, with 170 million units sold worldwide and 157 million in the U.S. alone, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. That puts him second all-time stateside, behind only The Beatles, whose domestic total is 183 million. Elvis Presley is next behind Garth at 146 million while, for perspective, the next best country artist, George Strait, is a long way down at 69 million.

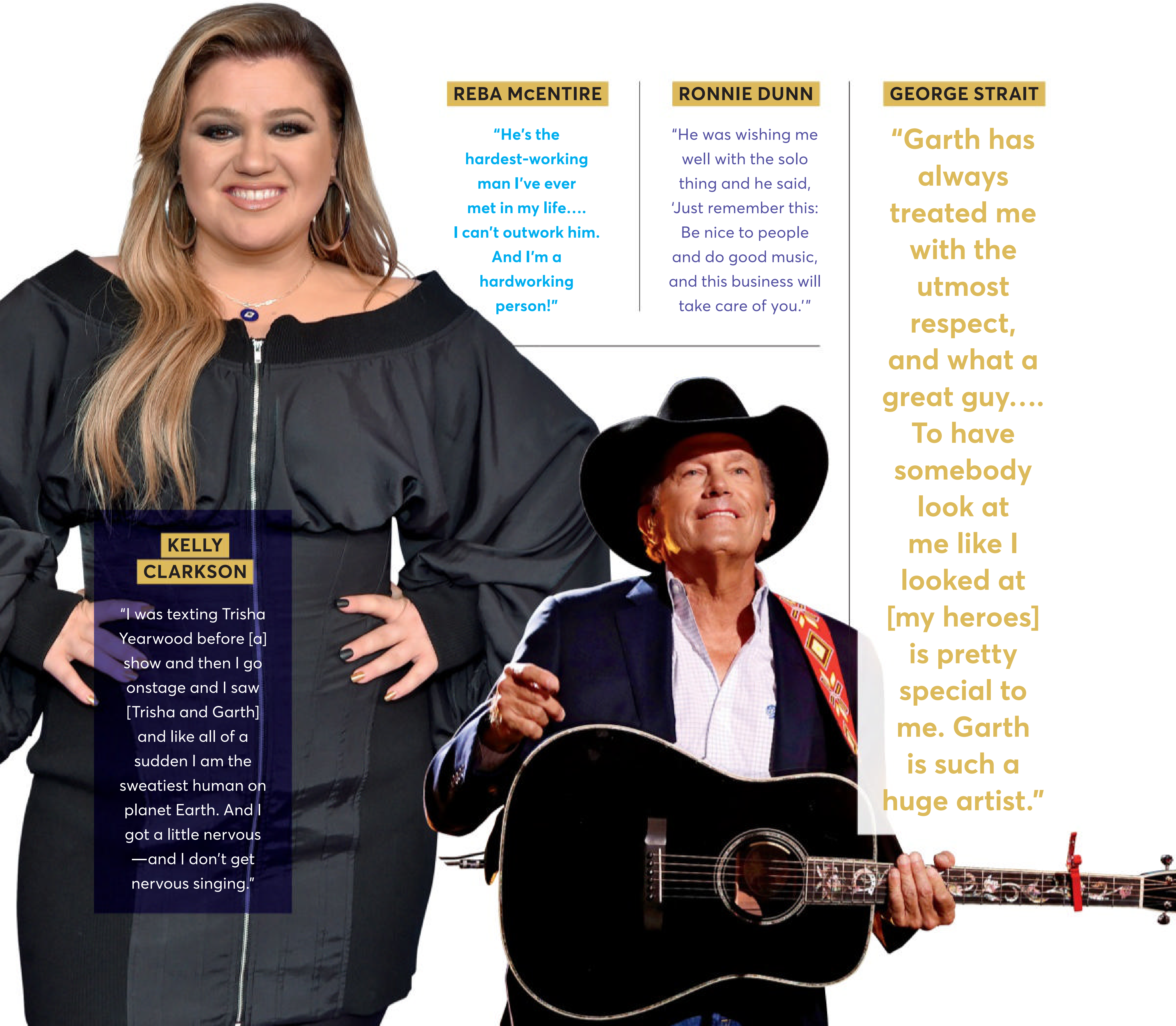
Internationally, Garth’s numbers aren’t noteworthy, though he still remains tops among the genre. The Beatles, Presley, Michael Jackson and Elton John have all surpassed 200 million in confirmed global sales, with some estimates placing “The Fab Four’s” ceiling as high as 600 million.

One place where Garth isn’t No. 1, is, well, No. 1s. Strait takes the honors among the country crowd, having accrued 44 chart-topping singles on *Billboard*’s country charts and 60 total across all U.S. charts. The late Conway Twitty is next up with 41, while Garth sits well behind at 19. That, however, is more impressive than it may sound at first blush: Garth has achieved that from a mere 52 solo singles released in his career. Likewise, he’s had nine No. 1 country albums from a grand total of 21 solo releases, studio and live combined.

And that’s to say nothing of how he got those No. 1 albums, five of which also topped the *Billboard* 200 pop chart. For a man so obsessed with baseball, you have to say it’s a hell of a batting average.

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND

Peers and fellow stars praise and reflect on the musical legend.



REBA McENTIRE

"He's the hardest-working man I've ever met in my life.... I can't outwork him. And I'm a hardworking person!"

RONNIE DUNN

"He was wishing me well with the solo thing and he said, 'Just remember this: Be nice to people and do good music, and this business will take care of you.'"

GEORGE STRAIT

"Garth has always treated me with the utmost respect, and what a great guy.... To have somebody look at me like I looked at [my heroes] is pretty special to me. Garth is such a huge artist."

KELLY CLARKSON

"I was texting Trisha Yearwood before [a] show and then I go onstage and I saw [Trisha and Garth] and like all of a sudden I am the sweatiest human on planet Earth. And I got a little nervous—and I don't get nervous singing."

ALAN JACKSON

"Boo! Do I scare you? I don't scare Garth either. I'm never gonna be Garth."

BLAKE SHELTON

"He is Garth Brooks. Garth Brooks! I don't give a s--- what anyone says. Anyone. Entertainer of the century."

RANDY TRAVIS

"When my last silent prayer is said, I'll thank God for Garth Brooks in my life. Our lives are like a mountain range—each a separate mountain, a different elevation, a different climb to the top, with different views—but it takes them all to make a range. [N]ever a day goes by that I doubt Garth is still there for me."

JASON ALDEAN

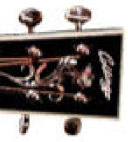
"When I was a kid, I had his poster on my wall. True story. Back then he was the guy and he still is. He knocked down a lot of doors for the artists who followed him....It's been an honor for me to walk through those doors, a dream come true to perform with Garth and a mind-blowing experience to call him my friend."

CARRIE UNDERWOOD

"When I was 10 years old I met Garth Brooks and said, 'If you ever need someone to sing a duet with, I'm your girl.' So I've been waiting for that forever."

WYNONNA JUDD

"He opened for us, and he was so polite. I remember being irritated because I thought he was so nice, and I wanted to be like that. [My mom Naomi Judd] came up to me after a show and said, 'You know, I like Garth and he's sweet. I don't think he's going to make it.'"



MARTINA McBRIDE

"The way he is with his fans, it's a familiar kind of feeling. Also, his crew and the people that work with him. I saw that firsthand having worked with him.... So really getting an inside peek behind the scenes on how things work.... That was a great example for me to follow."

The facts and figures that sum up the successful entertainer.

BY THE

DOUBLE LIVE
GARTH BROOKS
2 CD SET

Garth Brooks works the crowd during the Country Music Association Awards in New York City in November 2015.

67

TOTAL SINGLES HE'S RELEASED

127,000

The number of fans who attended his April 2022 show in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a U.S. record

170 Million

The total worldwide units of music sales for the country icon

2nd

He's the second-bestselling artist of all time, according to the Recording Industry Association of America

25

Videos that Garth Brooks has released

The singer takes some batting practice with the Pittsburgh Pirates during spring training in Florida in March 2019.

NUMBERS

$400 million

The singer's current net worth

21

The number of times *Double Live* has gone Platinum

9

Diamond albums, including compilations and live releases

23

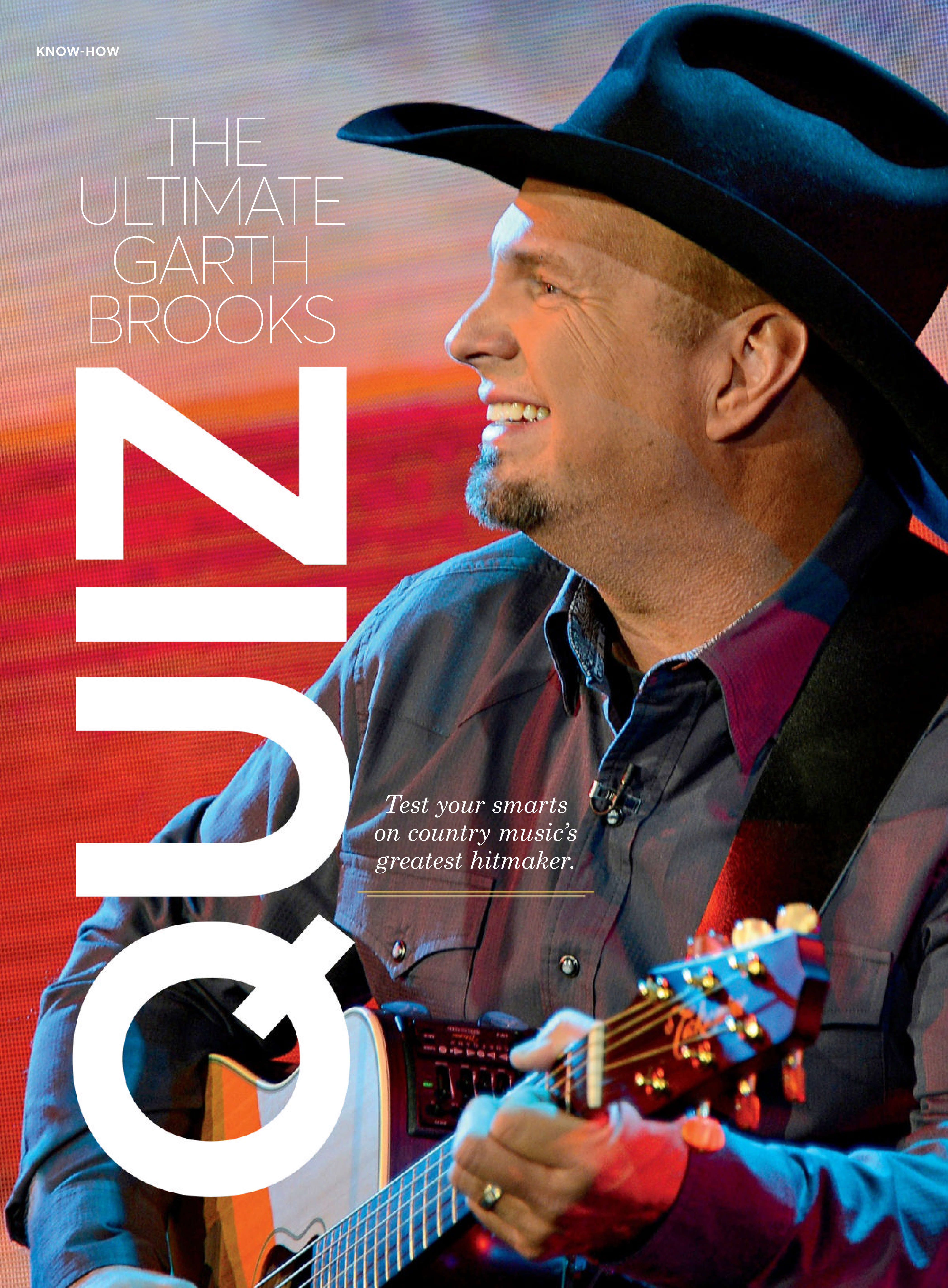
TROPHIES THE ARTIST HAS WON FROM THE ACADEMY OF COUNTRY MUSIC AWARDS

19

No. 1 country singles

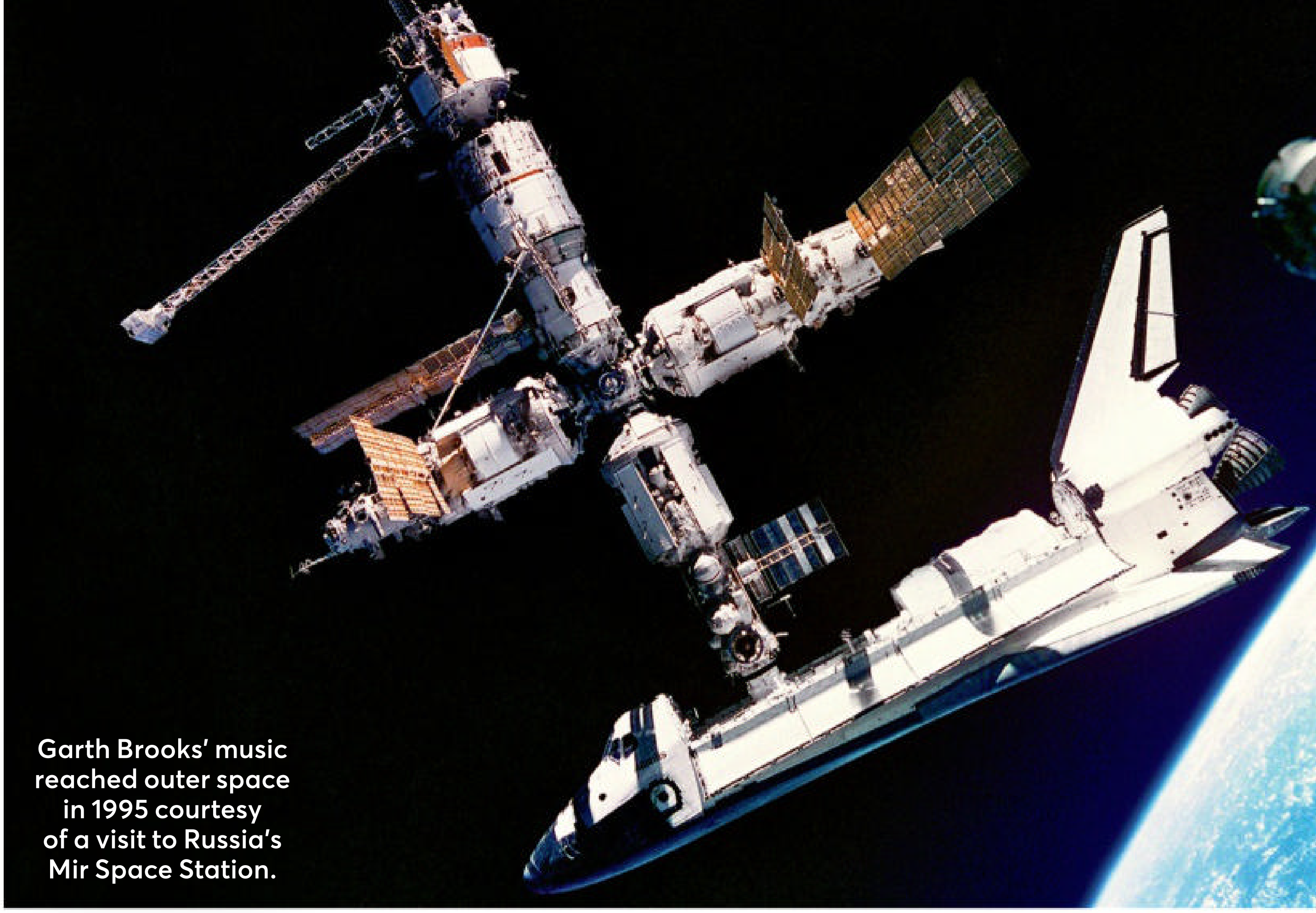
7

Garth's baseball jersey number



THE ULTIMATE GARTH BROOKS QUIZ

Test your smarts on country music's greatest hitmaker.



Garth Brooks' music reached outer space in 1995 courtesy of a visit to Russia's Mir Space Station.

1 What is Garth Brooks' middle name?

A. Troyal
B. Garth
C. James
D. Michael

2 On which day was the singer born?

A. Feb. 4
B. Feb. 5
C. Feb. 6
D. Feb. 7

3 What's his birth sign?

A. Sagittarius
B. Capricorn
C. Aquarius
D. Pisces

4 How tall is Garth?

A. 5'9"
B. 5'10"
C. 5'11"
D. 6'0"

5 Which position did he play in baseball?

A. Pitcher
B. Shortstop
C. Outfield
D. Catcher

6 What is Garth's favorite food?

A. Casserole
B. Hamburger
C. Spaghetti
D. Steak

7 What is Garth's highest-selling studio album to date?

A. *No Fences*
B. *Ropin' the Wind*
C. *The Chase*
D. *In Pieces*

8 Garth was working as a bartender when he met first wife Sandy Mahl.

True or False?

9 Which album did *Ropin' the Wind* knock from the No. 1 position on the *Billboard* pop chart?

A. Nirvana's *Nevermind*
B. Metallica's *Metallica*
C. Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion II*
D. Michael Jackson's *Dangerous*

10 Garth offered to donate part of his liver to his hero Chris LeDoux.

True or False?

11 Which baseball team did the singer not have a tryout with?

A. San Diego Padres
B. New York Mets
C. Texas Rangers
D. None of the above

12 The entertainer majored in what subject during college?

A. Agriculture
B. Advertising
C. Business
D. History

13 What brand of guitar does he play?

A. Takamine
B. Gibson
C. Fender
D. Martin

14 Chris Gaines was "born" in which year?

A. 1963
B. 1965
C. 1967
D. 1969

15 Which music video was banned from airing on CMT?

A. "The Dance"
B. "The Thunder Rolls"
C. "We Shall Be Free"
D. "If Tomorrow Never Comes"

16 Astronaut Col. Bill McArthur took this Garth album to the Mir Space Station.

A. *Double Live*
B. *No Fences*
C. *Ropin' the Wind*
D. *The Hits*

17 The longest autograph signing Garth ever did lasted how many hours?

A. 17
B. 19
C. 21
D. 23

18 One of his daughters is named after which of these famous singers?

A. Cecil Taylor
B. Roger Taylor
C. James Taylor
D. Andy Taylor

19 What year did Garth join the Grand Ole Opry?

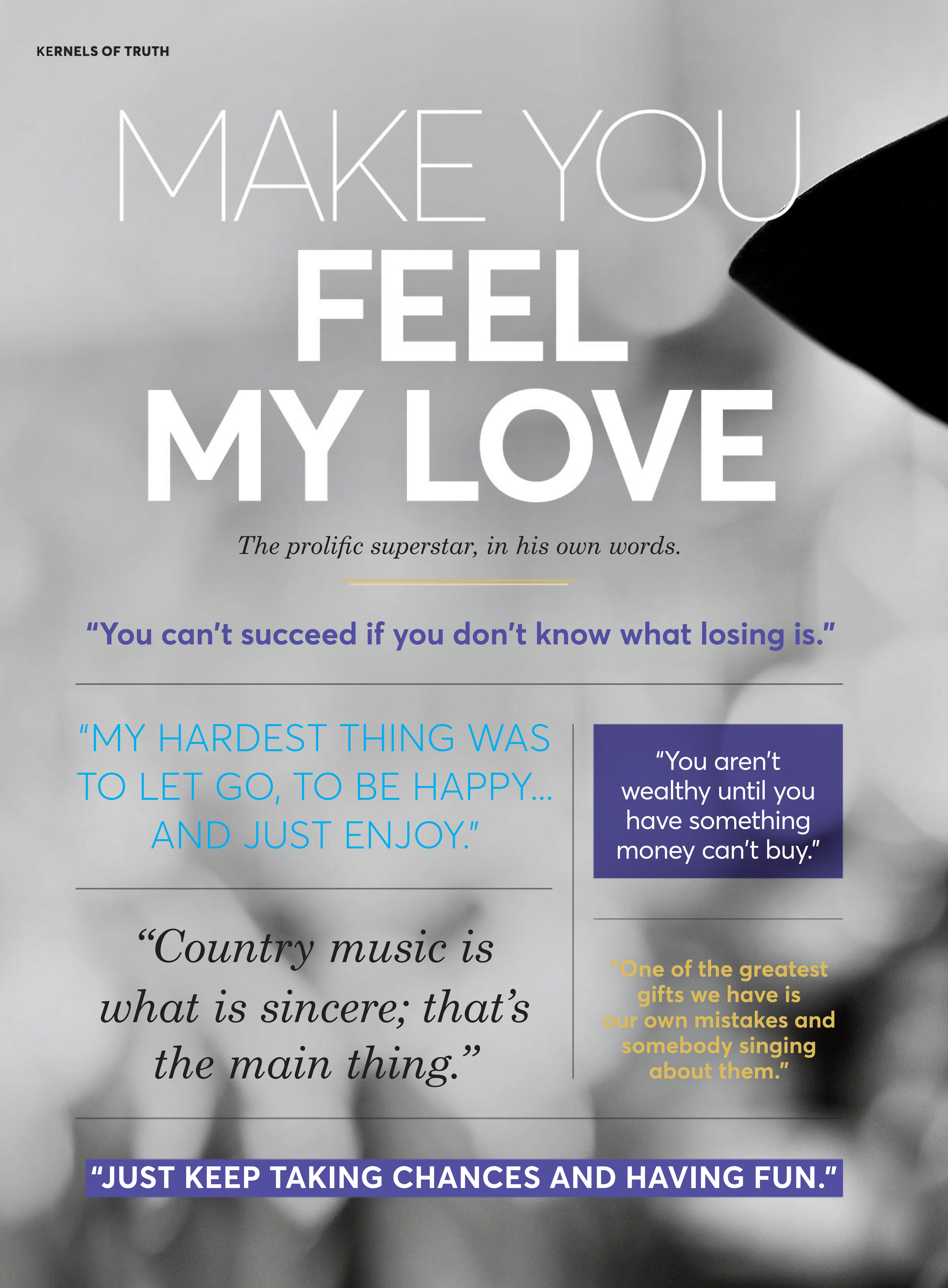
A. 1990
B. 1992
C. 1994
D. 1996

20 When did Garth earn his master's degree?

A. 2010
B. 2011
C. 2012
D. 2013

ANSWER KEY

1. B; 2. D; 3. C; 4. D; 5. C; 6. A; 7. A; 8. False; 9. B; 10. True; 11. C; 12. B; 13. A; 14. C; 15. B; 16. D; 17. D; 18. C; 19. A; 20. B.



MAKE YOU FEEL MY LOVE

The prolific superstar, in his own words.

"You can't succeed if you don't know what losing is."

"MY HARDEST THING WAS TO LET GO, TO BE HAPPY... AND JUST ENJOY."

"You aren't wealthy until you have something money can't buy."

"Country music is what is sincere; that's the main thing."

"One of the greatest gifts we have is our own mistakes and somebody singing about them."

"JUST KEEP TAKING CHANCES AND HAVING FUN."

"Happiness isn't getting what you want, it's wanting what you got."

"The greatest conflicts are not between two people but between one person and himself."

"Music keeps you eternally young. It just does."

"HERE'S MY WHOLE MARKETING IDEA: TREAT PEOPLE THE WAY YOU WANT TO BE TREATED."

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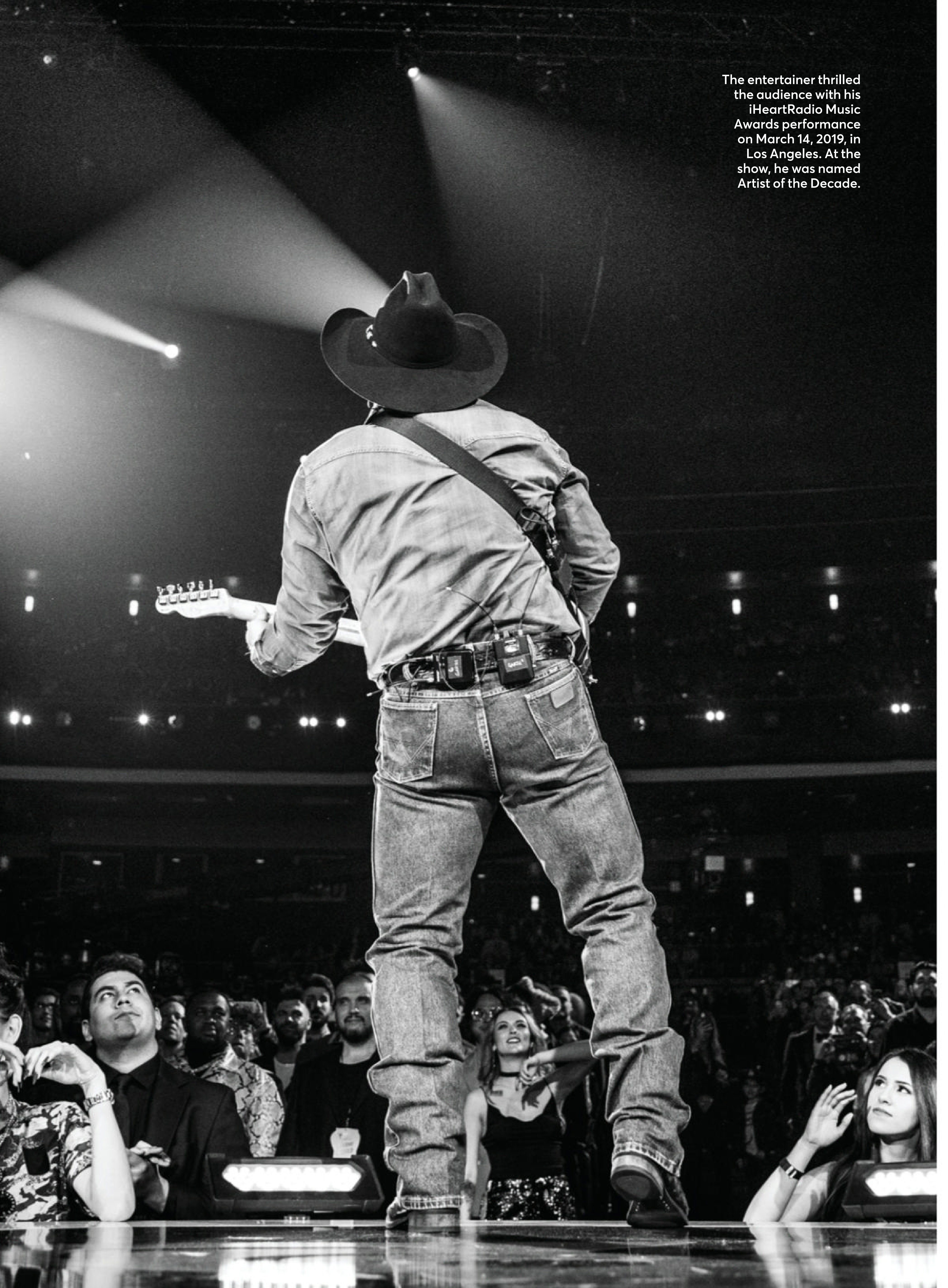

The entertainer thrilled the audience with his iHeartRadio Music Awards performance on March 14, 2019, in Los Angeles. At the show, he was named Artist of the Decade.

> “My hardest day of work in this business never felt like work.”
>
> **GARTH BROOKS**

“I’m not saying he’s perfect, but he’s pretty dang close,” Trisha Yearwood has said of her husband. Here, the couple attends an event at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee, on Oct. 16, 2016.